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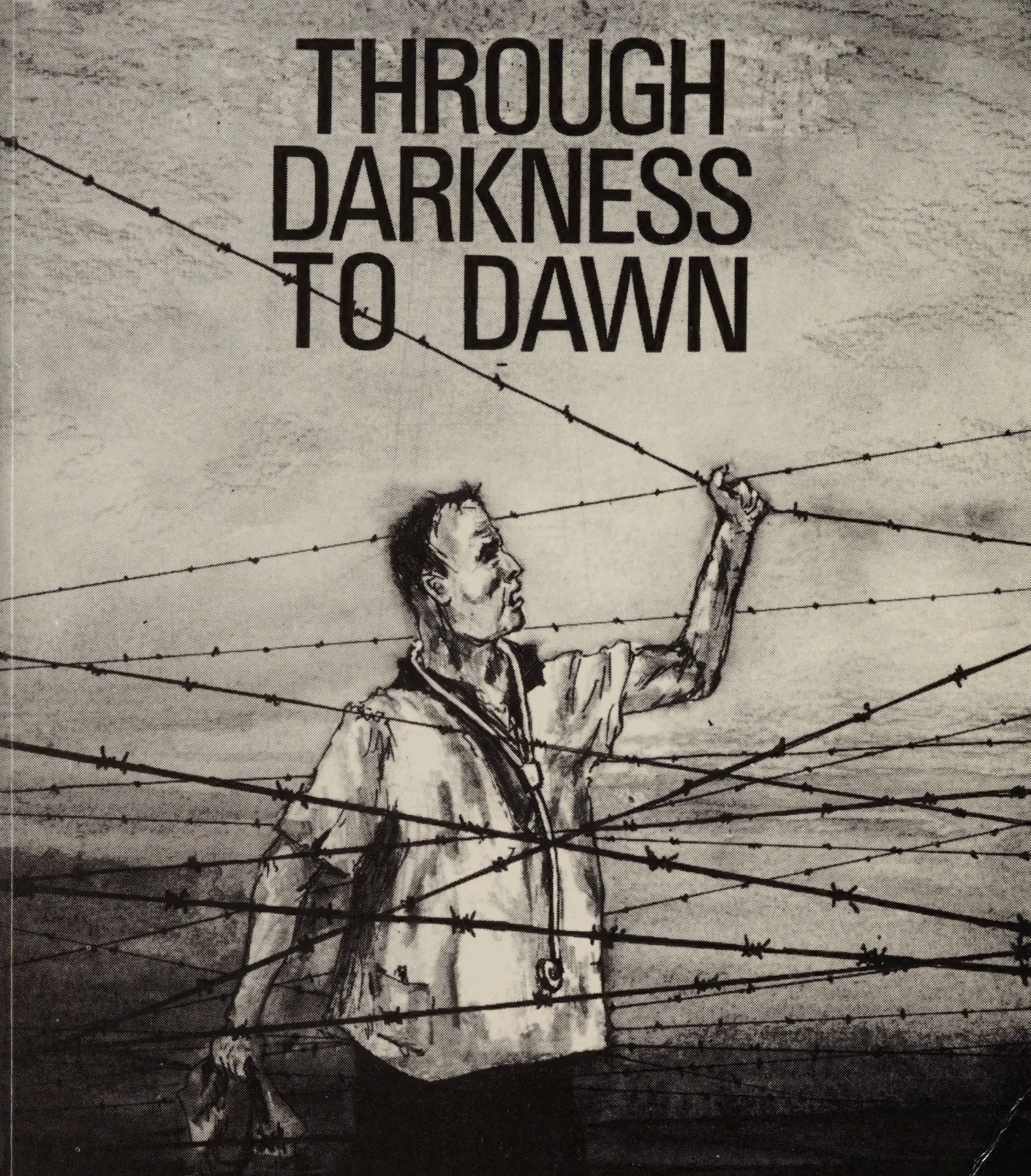
# THROUGH DARKNESS TO DAWN



Dr. John Geller

FEN

I dedicate this book
to my wife Blanka
with love and admiration

Croydon 1989

# THROUGH DARKNESS TO DAWN

by

**Dr. John Geller**

VERITAS FOUNDATION PUBLICATION CENTRE

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I wish to record my gratitude to Mr. Bernard Hare for his guidance and reviewing my manuscript for publication. I recognise that my task would have been very difficult without his help and his expert advice has been much appreciated.

The events described in the book were taken from my personal diary which I was able to keep, although sometimes with considerable difficulty during the years as a prisoner.

All the facts recorded are entirely true.

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Dr. John Geller

## CONTENTS


| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | INTRODUCTION | 1 |
| Chapter | | |
| 1 | CAPTIVITY IN TWO PRISONS AND MY SENTENCE | 7 |
| 2 | G.P. IN RUSSIAN PRISON CAMPS | 19 |
| 3 | UPON LIBERATION JOINED THE POLISH FORCES. VISIT TO MY PARENTS IN RUSSIA | 55 |
| 4 | TRANSFER TO UZBEKISTAN, ONE OF THE RUSSIAN REPUBLICS, TO A PLACED CALLED GUZARY | 66 |
| 5 | ASSIGNMENT TO IRAN AND IRAQ AND ATTENDANCE AT CADET SCHOOL | 71 |
| 6 | TRANSFER TO AN ARMY HOSPITAL. LEAVE IN PALESTINE ON ROUTE TO EGYPT | 79 |
| 7 | IN TRANSIT FROM EGYPT FOR A NEW ASSIGNMENT TO THE POLISH REFUGEES IN ISFAHAN AND TEHERAN | 93 |
| 8 | LEAVING TEHERAN FOR KENYA | 105 |
| 9 | RECALL TO FORCES AND ARRIVAL IN UNITED KINGDOM | 115 |
| | POSTSCRIPT | 119 |

## INTRODUCTION

The morning of February the 3rd, 1940, was one that is imprinted indelibly on my mind. Packed into a cell with almost a hundred others, we shared the common fears of refugees the world over. I had fled a comfortable medical practice in Cracow in the face of the German Army's occupation of the city for what seemed the lesser of two evils. By crossing the River San into Russian occupied Eastern Poland, I had escaped the Germans and placed by life in the hands of that other invader of my country, whose intentions towards Jewish nationals one could only guess at. The KGB officer's confiscation of my identity card at Przemysl railway station was not a happy augury, though accompanied by the promise of release within forty-eight hours.

The only consolation I could find was in the sheer mass of prisoners, whose body heat raised the temperature inside our cell to an acceptable warmth. Appraising them individually, I was struck by the haunted expressions in their eyes. Conversation was spasmodic, each man preoccupied with thoughts of his own uncertain destiny. I did not recognise a single familiar face, nor could I assess the background of any man there. In the months of uncertainty following the outbreak of the Second World War, we had learned of the dreaded secret police, who infiltrated groups of people to report to their political masters any activity that could be interpreted as dangerous to the State. My unchosen companions here could as well have included a paid informer as a defecting Government Official, merchant banker, common criminal, or even a fellow doctor. Without official identity or status, we were all equal – and equally dispensable.

The only break in the monotony of that endless day was the Warders' arrival with bread and soup, after which the door clanged shut and we were left to our own thoughts once more. As night came, some of the men tried to sleep standing up, only to be awoken by the involuntary movements of one of their neighbours. Rest was impossible, as I soon discovered. The most I could manage was to shift my weight slightly from one foot to another at regular intervals and endeavour to move my arms to restore circulation.

I knew that a prisoner's greatest enemy was that same tide of depression that now swept over me, but I reasoned that the possibility of release, even if not in the forty-eight hours promised, must be accepted in the absence of any other straw to clutch at.

I still had my life and the memories of better days, together with a few

personal belongings I had travelled with. About my neck was the scarf of my beloved wife Zosia, with whom I had exchanged my own at our tearful parting before my journey. As I saw her face, other much earlier memories came flooding back, and I was a child again in Gorlice, in the province of Cracow.

I was born a few kilometers away in Sokol, on a small estate that had come to my mother as a dowry on her marriage. A year or so later, the estate was sold with the move to Gorlice, where my father took work as a clerk at the local sawmill, and my brother William and my sister Clara, a most beautiful child, were born. We were not to be settled here, however. In 1914 the invading Russian armies threatened our happy way of life, and the family, together with relatives living in our vicinity, set off with a few treasured possessions for the unknown. After some days of journeying by hand-cart and train, we arrived in the small town of Tachau, near Eger, in what was then Slovakia.

The flat we rented was small, and when my baby sister Bertha came along, her arrival put more pressure on the limited space. And although my father's part-time job was necessary to augment the family budget, we attended our first regular secondary school and the days passed pleasantly. Much of the credit for this must go to our mother, Pola, who seemed to work incessantly. When she was not engrossed in all the tasks of running a home with six people to cater for, she would correct our homework. All lessons in school were given in German – no problem for mother with her good Lyceum education – and we soon learned to write and speak the language well.

With the ending of the War in 1918, yet another change came. As refugees, the authorities gave my parents the choice of moving to barracks in Czechoslovakia, or returning home to Poland. The attraction of our native country overcame the doubts, and we set off back to Gorlice.

When we arrived there after travelling through the war-ravaged villages, we were horrified at what we found. The heaviest fighting had been around Gorlice, desolating the once-pretty houses, shops and municipal offices. The sawmill was one of the buildings totally destroyed, and the only shelter available was offered by a cousin of my father – a small, bare hut on the outskirts of the town by the ruined sawmill. It was totally inadequate, but there was nothing else. An unexpected bonus was a large piece of land within the grounds of the sawmill that went with the hut, and this my father set to work to cultivate. With manure and any other fertiliser he could come by, he prepared the ground, planted the

crops, and in due course harvested them with our willing though unskilled help. A remembered pleasure was gleaning the corn after harvest and collecting the grain to be ground in a zarna (handmill).

My brother William and I were accepted by the Gymnasium, a vital step forward. Here, a classical education in Latin and Greek was offered, with German the obligatory third language besides our native tongue. We were happy with this arrangement, brought about by the German-speaking Austrians in occupation, although all lessons were given in Polish. I also had to take other subjects including Mathematics, my bete-noir, but there were compensations. I soon got to know the headmaster, a philologist, who helped by recommending me to the parents of students given low marks, who needed extra tuition. In private I was able to charge a fee which made a useful contribution to our family budget.

Meanwhile we had moved from the hut to a very small flat, consisting of two rooms and a tiny kitchen, but we had no alternative as new properties were very scarce and the rent for houses was certainly beyond our means.

Our mother took a lively interest in the local charities, was an active member of the orphanage, and a secretary of the library. We absolutely adored her. Popular and respected by everyone who knew her, she organised private tuition for William and myself for the first two years in the Gymnasium to enable us to make a good start, and was very much concerned that we should have a good education. Her care of us was beyond praise and I remember that when school uniforms, or other clothing had to be bought, she paid by monthly instalments spread over two or three years. I had only one pair of shoes during my school days and when they had to be repaired I sometimes couldn't go to school.

I received my certificate of matriculation in 1924 and applied to the medical school at the University in Cracow, but my application was rejected as a "numerus clausus" existed – there were 100 places available at the medical school of which 90 were for gentiles and only 10 for Jewish students, I therefore enrolled in a different faculty and attended the Latin lectures of Professor Sinko, the Greek of Professor Sternbach, and the anatomy of Professor Kostanecki.

The following year I reapplied for a place at the same medical school in Cracow, this time with a letter of introduction to the Dean of the medical school from a family contact, a former Prime Minister in the Polish government. Together with letters from the local Member of Parliament and the director of the general hospital this achieved the desired result,

and to my great relief and joy, I was granted a place at the medical school in Cracow, one of the oldest in Poland.

There commenced a time of great happiness. In spite of an income that never allowed for more than the bare necessities, those were years rich in achievement. I took fairly easily to the disciplines of medicine, passed the intermediate examinations, and enjoyed a full social life, within the University. I had the use of a room, free of charge, from one of my father's cousins, and by various means was able to furnish it. I was even freed from the chore of dealing with my own laundry, which went home by messenger and was returned clean every fortnight along with home-made bread and other contributions to my well-being. It was at this time that I fell in love with my lovely cousin Zosia, a student with me, who combined a striking personality with a warm-hearted nature that I found irresistible. We met frequently at weekends and went off on trips, cherishing every moment we spent together.

At last my parents had managed to change their small, inconvenient flat for one larger and better. It was in a newly-built house by the sawmill, and I spent my vacations there. Arrival at the railway station was always an event, with the *dorozka* (horse-drawn cab) drivers offering to convey me and my family, who were usually there to greet me, to our home without charge. I became so well known that one of them invariably used my nickname of Janek. It was a joy to be home on these family occasions, and when my mother told me that she had rented a room in a nearby villa especially for my studies, I was even more indebted to her. She seemed to think of everything.

Given this committed support when I most needed it, and my own enthusiasm, it was a logical conclusion of my studies to graduate in 1932 with the equivalent of a Bachelor of Medicine Degree, followed at the end of 1934 by my Doctorate. The joy of this was modified, however, by an unpleasant incident at the Collegium Novum. I had called to collect my MD Diploma, overlooking the fact that on this particular day, no Jewish student was allowed into the University. On entering I was alarmed to see a group of students, armed with sticks, converging on me. The hatred in their faces I shall remember all my life, and it seemed inevitable that I would be severely beaten. In desperation, I looked for help, seeing only a young woman student. To my surprise, she began entreating the gang not to attack me and to let me go about my business in peace. Thankfully they listened and, somewhat grudgingly, let me go out.

By this time I already had two years of practical experience in the Cracow State Hospital, training in the various departments, working

without pay. Only principal assistants and senior doctors received a salary, so I was dependent on the part-time tuition I continued to give. Nonetheless, the experience was an ideal preparation for general practice, and in the year of my Doctorate I began to practise as a physician in the Wolnica Square, Cracow. As soon as I had saved enough, in 1936, Zosia and I were married and moved into our new flat close by the famous castle Wawel. With my wife's dental practice and my surgery based in the flat, we worked and lived together harmoniously. In the mornings I worked at the nearby Bonifrater Hospital, and for three hours in the afternoon in my own practice.

As a result of my work at the Bonifrater Hospital I made a wide variety of acquaintances and also numbered some priests among my patients. We entertained the Bonifrater Hospital Staff, who were in fact nursing monks, in our flat, and they enjoyed fish dishes prepared in the Jewish manner. In the vicinity of my practice was a well known restaurant specialising in Jewish dishes. The dining-room had been built in the XIVth Century during the reign of King Casimirus the Great, and it was frequented by some very distinguished Polish clients. In the evening we used to meet our friends at the popular Cafe Phoenix in the centre of the city and once or twice weekly went to see a film. At least once a month we paid a visit to the theatre, and from time to time also to a night club where we enjoyed dancing. Living was inexpensive, the work pleasant, and gradually we both built up our practices, the income from which, considering that they were in their early years, was satisfactory without being luxurious. We could support our parents – my wife's and mine – and this was a source of great satisfaction to both of us. Above all, our marriage thrived. For the time being we did not plan to have a family, and were content with each other.

But the virus of antisemitism was spreading from Germany and at the end of 1938, or the beginning of 1939, while I was attending a general meeting of the Polish Medical Association, in Cracow, a motion was proposed by Dr. Brzeski to deprive all Jewish doctors of their Polish Medical Association membership. All Jewish doctors present immediately left the conference. Some time later I received a letter of dismissal from the Bonifrater Hospital, where I still worked in the medical department as I had done for years without any salary. This was even more hurtful, as my relations with the Prior of the establishment, and with the doctors, had been most friendly over the years. By late 1939, the future looked more and more overcast, the political horizon obscured by stormclouds, and the Indian summer which we had been enjoying replaced by the approach of winter. Nothing was heard from the government, who it was popularly believed had fled. The citizens of

Cracow were in despair, having no idea of what they could or should do. Rumour succeeded wild rumour, and no firm guidance from any quarter emerged from the general chaos. The stream of Jewish refugees fleeing from Germany to Cracow filled our hearts with apprehension, and our view of the future was overlaid with misgiving and uncertainty.

Then the advancing Germans occupied Cracow. My wife and I considered what best to do. The general situation heightened our apprehension and the atmosphere was tense. Conflicting rumours continued to circulate and many different opinions could be heard, but no one actually talked about the threatened mass extermination of the Jewish people. It was unimaginable. We supposed that women whatever else happened, would be let alone and unharmed. As the atmosphere became more and more feverish and faced with the enormity of the rumours and the increasing pressure, we thought it might be better that I leave Cracow and find a temporary home in the eastern part of Poland, having no idea what was going on there. It looked as though time was running out, and after a sleepless night we decided that it would be far better and safer for both of us if I disappeared from Cracow. Just before parting, my wife said "My darling, this is war. We cannot know whether our judgement is sound, or our decision reasonable. Perhaps we are wrong, and we shall not see each other again. Let's exchange our scarves." And so I had to leave her there, choked with emotion I could not control, having a presentiment of unhappiness to come. . . .

## CAPTIVITY IN TWO PRISONS AND MY SENTENCE

### CHAPTER 1

Dawn broke to end my first night in captivity. We had not long to wait before the sounds of the prison stirring reached us. A warder appeared and we found ourselves lining up in the corridor, where we were split into groups and transferred to smaller cells. There were thirty-five prisoners in the room with me, among them a slim, thin-faced Pole called Jan Szostak, with whom I became friendly. Looking out through the window, we could see the young women prisoners having to meet their physiological needs in the open. Jan said "The sanitary conditions here are appalling. As a doctor, you must be even more horrified than I am."

I had to agree. The prison had not been built to house such numbers. We used the small washrooms and lavatories daily under the supervision of the Russian guard, and at night slept on the floor in the clothes we wore each day.

Interrogation was carried out by Polish-speaking Russians in uniform. When my turn came, I was marched into a room that served as an office. The man at the desk began, "I understand you are a Polish doctor from Cracow. You have been arrested for breaking the law."

"I was not aware of that."

"You were found on this side of the River San, in territory that we are occupying. In the first place, you should not have been there. In the second, you had drugs in your possession."

"All doctors carry drugs in their emergency cases."

"Or perhaps to sell for food or favours?"

"No. Only for medical use."

"Naturally you would say that, if you think it will help to save your skin."

"I am telling the truth."

The interrogator shrugged. "As far as we are concerned, you have committed two offences, both punishable. I am not satisfied with your answers. Your may go now, for the time being."

Two or three days later, a high-ranking officer came to the cell and drew me aside from the others. He held in front of me a piece of paper with my mother's name and address on it. "Wouldn't you like to see your mother?" he asked.

I was startled, and could not work out how they had obtained this.

"Of course you want to see her" said his officer, reading the unspoken reply in my face. "It can easily be arranged." He let the information sink in. I knew what was coming.

"We need your cooperation, Dr. Geller. Your refusal to accept that you committed the offences you were arrested for make things difficult. If you could now sign this statement, it will make life simpler for everybody."

He had not threatened me, nor raised his voice. Yet I knew that they had the upper hand. I was terrified that if I continued protesting my innocence, some dreadful fate could befall my family. There was nothing for it but to give way. I signed the hated form where indicated. The officer picked it up without a second glance. "That will be all, Dr. Geller."

"What will you do with me now?"

"We shall see."

When he had gone, and I had recovered somewhat, I related to Szostak what had happened, and we discussed the possibilities of escape.

Szostak used to receive parcels regularly, the contents of which he shared with me. I confided in him some details about my family and my address in Cracow, and in return he told me his own story in case one of us should be lucky enough to regain his freedom. Whichever one of us did would then contact the other's family. Through the good offices of one of the prisoners, a member of the kitchen staff who seemd to be a reliable man, I had already arranged for my family in Lvov to be notified of my whereabouts.

One day we were visited by a high ranking Russian officer who asked us in Polish how we were getting on. Quite incidentally he said, "you have a doctor here as well". Then he approached me, making enquiries about the health of the other occupants. On the spur of the moment an idea dawned on me. Knowing already that the Russians were afraid of some infectious diseases, I said that among us in the cell there was one Pole who was passing blood, as well as having diarrhoea, and I thought this might be caused by dysentery. I added that we were worried in case it was contagious.

The officer then asked me which of them it was, and I looked round pretending that he was not well known to me. After some hesitation, I indicated Jan Szostak, who was sitting on the floor like the rest of us, and said that I thought he was the sick man.

Szostak and I were convinced that he would be admitted to the hospital soon, so he said to me "Janek, take my pillow and keep it as a souvenir of our friendship. I don't think I will need it any more. It may be useful to you".

One hour later a guard entered our cell and told Szostak to follow him.

Before leaving, he said "I shall call on your wife, so mind you keep well". That was the last time I ever saw him.

A day later I was called to the office and asked by a KGB officer whether I knew Dr. Sroka from Cracow who had been assigned to the prison as a doctor. Some questions were put to me about how well I knew him as a doctor, whether I had been in contact with him in Cracow, and so on. I guessed that as soon as my family found out that I was in prison they approached Dr. Sroka for some help, but whatever his attempts to get me released, they failed.

After some twelve to fourteen days I was taken at night to the railway station in Przemysl, with hundreds of other prisoners, surrounded by dozens of Russian guards, armed with machine guns, and there we were herded into cattle trucks, some 30–40 or more of us in each truck. There was no heating whatsoever on the train and the weather was bitterly cold and frosty. The only food we were given was a piece of bread daily and also a very little water to drink. Some of us managed to doze in a squatting position. There was a large container in the truck which served as a toilet, and this was emptied by the prisoners from time to time at a station en route, watched of course by a Russian soldier. No washing facilities of any kind were available during the journey which was, as can be imagined, both frightening and depressing, crowded as we were in wagons with iron-barred windows, knowing neither where we were going nor what awaited us when we reached our destination. After some long stops at a number of stations we arrived in Odessa about the 12th of March 1940, where I was introduced in the courtyard by the Commanding Officer of the prison to all the Poles who had come with me, as the Polish doctor from Cracow who was a drug smuggler.

## ODESSA

We Poles were allocated to block 49, which was a large building containing dozens of cells. Together with 28 others I was assigned to a small cell roughly 7 by 4 metres; it had a window fitted with iron bars and the walls were painted white. For the first 5 weeks we slept on the stone floor, and although there was central heating in the cell it was not working. One of the first things we did was to elect a "leader" who would organise our day to day activities so far as such organisation was feasible.

Our routine started at about 5.30 to 6 a.m. when the warder opened the door and brought in a bucket of very weak tea, or other herbs, which was shared out by our leader, a Pole who came from a little Polish

village. The best of this was that the drink was warm and in addition everyone was given a sweet to have with the tea. We were also issued with spoons and plates and about 400 gms. of dark bread, (approximately as much as a small English loaf), which had to last for the whole day. I was the only one in the cell who divided it into three portions while others finished theirs in one go. About half an hour later the guard, Ivan, opened the door and went with us to the washroom and toilets where we were locked in for about fifteen to twenty minutes. During that inadequate time we had to arrange for everyone to wash in quick succession, since there were only four taps and we were in a hurry as everyone had also to use the toilets in turn. A large container was also provided in the cell to be used for "out of hours" toilet necessities, but on very rare occasions Ivan also allowed us to go to the outside toilets in the afternoon. When the containers were full to overflowing, after persistent knocking by the orderly at the door, they could be emptied in the toilet by one of the inmates under the watchful eye of Ivan.

At noon a big bucket of soup with some greens, sometimes also some microscopic fibres or meat, or occasionally, cereals, was brought in. Its distribution required some skill in order to avoid heated arguments in such a mixed community. I had my soup with a piece of the bread I had saved. The evening meal very often consisted of a portion of very small, very salty fish and as the ensuing thirst was really unbearable, I never ate it and instead had the remainder of my daily portion of bread with some water. My companions in the cell envied my self-control, which enabled me to make my portion of bread last throughout the whole day.

The regulations laid down that we were not permitted to sleep during the day and so we had to sit up on whatever luggage we had managed to retain. Eventually, after many requests and petitions to the authorities, very thin mattresses were provided in the second half of April, but we were so squashed together that it was almost impossible for us to move about. I sometimes tried to sleep lying down but it was not easy. Moreover the light in the cell was on throughout the night, which was scarcely conducive to sleep. We were crowded to such an extent that on two occasions instead of scratching myself I found myself scratching my neighbour.

Jan Szostak's pillow was indeed a luxury and I treasured it. But I must confess that on many nights it was soaked with tears as I worried about the fate of my family, whether they were safe and, if so, their whereabouts.

Every seven to ten days we were allowed to walk in the open air for a

few minutes in a specially confined space in the courtyard, in single file with hands held behind our backs and without talking to each other. In spite of the vigilance of the guards, the old timers, used to the ways of prisons, were able to bring back to the cell odd bits of news garnered from slips of paper found under stones, left by other Poles. We had a shower about once a fortnight during which all our clothing was sent for delousing to a heat room. Soap was distributed but no towels, though some of the inmates had their own. There was a shop in the prison, so those who had enough money could order soap, toothbrushes and tooth-powder. It was astonishing that anybody could keep money as it was confiscated against the issue of a receipt when discovered during the periodic searches.

Towards the end of April, a guard opened the cell door and called my name. It was now my turn. On the short walk across the courtyard to the KGB establishment office, my thoughts swung wildly from one disturbing possibility to another. The Russians were clearly obsessed with things political, apparently convinced that every prisoner was an *agent provocateur* in disguise. If they could find a sinister purpose in my crossing the River San with the legitimate trappings of a doctor, what awful imputation might be attributed to my background, university training, friends?

We entered the little room to face a KGB officer of about fifty, in military uniform, at his desk. First he wanted my full name, which he already had. Then it was my parents', grandparents', sisters', brothers'. After that we came to the details of my personal life and medical practice, with particular reference to political affiliations that my questioner seemed convinced I had.

There was no indication as to whether he was satisfied with my responses, but at least I was returned to my cell.

It was a motley bunch of men that I shared with, the majority apparently smugglers operating across the Russo-German lines of demarcation. Their language was spiced with obscenities and criminal slang, some of which I listed for want of something to do. The other occupation I found rewarding was keeping a record of day to day events on loose sheets of paper from a number of sources. When completed each day, I hid them between the pages of my Polish *Vade Mecum*, an abbreviated medical reference book that went everywhere with me.

One of the tasks that fell to the KGB was to pick out from the internees a suitable candidate to inform on the others in return for some level of

gratification, or at least the promise of it. Those who were called for interrogation more frequently than others were our prime suspects, and naturally our conversation in their presence was well guarded. One such person was young Manuish Messner from Brno in Moravia, whose father Joseph always stood next to him. Manuish was a veritable fount of knowledge, steeped in Russian ideology, and clearly not to be confided in. By such means, the KGB made it difficult for trust to exist between individuals, and without mutual trust, no conspiracy can succeed.

From the habitual criminals, I learned many of the tricks so essential to survival in prison. One of these concerned the ability to produce a high body temperature within ten minutes or less. The secret was to rub salt and onions, both readily available, into the armpits of the "patient". Astonishingly this produced a temperature of around 38 degrees C, with realistic symptoms of feverishness. Every fortnight, coinciding with the weekly visit of the prison nurse, Sofia, or the four-weekly one of Lidya the Russian lady Doctor, we would prepare the man chosen by our cell leader, checking by the thermometer I kept hidden in the cell. Knowing that generally, medical help was quickly on hand in an emergency, we could rely upon the man being taken to hospital. There, his duty was to get hold of any part of a newspaper so that we could be kept informed of developments in the outside world. Quite often, the ruse succeeded.

One of the most difficult things to contend with at this stage, three months after capture, was the feeling of isolation. None of us knew what was happening to our relatives and friends, how the war was going, or even if it was still in progress. There was a sense of detachment, in which recent events such as the heartbreaking parting from my wife Zosia appeared at a far greater distance than the actual time-scale showed. In such an artificial existence as we led, where perspective was distorted and trivial matters assumed the importance of major events, we longed for a sign to reassure us that somebody outside knew we were there. One day, when small shafts of sunlight penetrated the gloom of our cell, a starling perched on the window sill. It seemed determined to get in, and with a vigorous effort, it forced itself through the bars and made straight for me, alighting on my shoulder. This was immediately interpreted by a Pole who claimed to be an expert on the interpretation of dreams and the occult as indicating that I would be set free that afternoon. Great interest centred on the bird and where it had come from. Some said from Poland, others Russia, a few, Africa. While all this was going on, the poor bird fell from my shoulder to the floor.

For a long moment there was silence in the cell, as a sense of shock numbed our minds. At first we could not believe that the bird, embodying

all our symbolic hopes of freedom, could have succumbed. Examination confirmed the fragility of life, and I felt a great sadness. The luckless Pole who had predicted my release made abject apology, adding that at the very moment of the starling's flight into the next world, someone close to my family must also have passed away. The incident cast its shadow over the next few days, and caused me many a sleepless night.

Part of our regular routine was a thorough check-up every two to three weeks. Two guards dressed in black overalls came to the cell where we had to undress ourselves, and thereafter, when we were naked, go out to be searched in the corridor. This procedure also included a thorough search of our belongings and clothing left in the cell. Ivan the guard appeared one day, bringing a large loaf of bread which he handed over to me, asking me to go out to the corridor as he wished to speak privately. I did not think that I needed the wisdom of Solomon to sense what was behind it, so I offered the loaf of bread straight away to the leader of the cell and suggested that he distributed it between the very young prisoners who always felt hungry. To Ivan, I said that if he had any questions he should ask them here in the cell as I felt too weak to stand out in the corridor. Ivan had never been civil to me but after this incident his dislike turned to hatred. He used to check up through the grille to see what I was doing nearly every evening when he was on duty, and during the day as well. In effect, I had become a marked man.

To break the monotony we arranged lectures. The baker's apprentice told us about his work, the gardener related stories about festive celebrations in S.E. Poland during the vintage, and also the secret of how to preserve various sorts of plums in clay pottery for Christmas. I had to contribute as well and was asked to talk on masturbation and its ill effects, if there were any; about V.D. and vitamin deficiencies.

At the beginning of June I was picked out by the cell leader for a hospital "visit", and had to submit myself to the routine rubbing of the armpits. When the warder opened the door and the nurse came in and asked how we felt, the leader said "our doctor" was not well. My temperature was checked and I was of course found to be feverish and so admitted to the prison hospital. It was a wonderful experience to sleep on a bed, although I found out that a prisoner had died on the same bed only a few hours before my admission. I complained in the hospital about a pain in the chest, but after four days I was discharged. I returned to my cell in good spirits as on the third day of my stay in the hospital I had snatched four pages of a Russian newspaper found in the toilet. This was, in the eyes of my cell mates, a really outstanding achievement and was very much appreciated. It was as though another degree had been

added to my M.D. and they thenceforth showed me extra respect and trusted me far more than before. Two days after my discharge from the hospital the warder, Ivan, demanded my thermometer and fountain pen. It turned out that one of the prisoners had sold the secret of my hoard to the guard for a piece of bread. Ivan warned me that he would make my life a misery if I would not give him the required articles. The whole cell was shocked and turned on the informer, who had to be removed to another cell for his own safety, but the deed had been done, and I had no alternative but to give up my hidden treasures. I had a very good "introduction" from Ivan each time to the guards who used to come regularly to check us telling them that they had to be very thorough when searching me as I was an expert in hiding forbidden articles. It was most interesting that on each occasion the special guards, in spite of their very thorough methods, usually found some new objects which the prisoners were not allowed to keep but which had not been found previously. The human body shows unusual resistance in spite of all the difficulties surrounding one, as long as the spirit remains buoyant and faith in a brighter future is maintained.

The heat in the packed cell, in June in Odessa, was unbearable; we perspired profusely but were not given enough water. Some of the prisoners were almost naked. I noticed that a peasant from a village I knew had a piece of cotton material, so I asked him to make me a pair of underpants which I could wear with no other clothing. He did so, cutting the material with a piece of glass which he had managed to keep concealed as well as his needle and thread. The underpants were in the circumstances a real luxury and kept me cool. They were rather expensive as I had to pay in what amounted to almost foreign currency, i.e. with a ration of daily bread paid in three instalments every day for three consecutive days; one third of the daily ration given to us. It was indeed like paying in very hard currency!

Ivan, knowing that one particular prisoner was always hungry, played a practical joke on him one day, asking whether he would be able to finish a bucket of soup with cereals in one go. The prisoner accepted the challenge with great satisfaction. The next morning, as agreed, the bucket was supplied by Ivan and the prisoner emptied it within fifteen or twenty minutes. Ivan watched him with real delight, knowing full well that the prisoner would pay dearly for his greed. He was taken ill with abdominal pains, accompanied by vomiting and diarrhoea, which lasted for almost four days, but he survived. It proved to be a lesson he well remembered.

Among those in our cell there was a Pole, Mr. Mroczko, aged about 45

years, who was highly neurotic with a rather neglected appearance. He complained of stabbing pains in his legs, his gait was unsteady, he suffered from insomnia, and I assumed the symptoms might have been due to tabes dorsalis? One day when the ritual walk was due, he told the warder that he was not used to walking, giving at the same time the impression that he was suffering from delusions of grandeur and indeed, playing the part very well. He introduced himself as the Polish Foreign Minister, Mr. Beck, and demanded his car and chauffeur. Ivan informed the KGB officers who rushed to our cell and enjoyed the prisoner's performance. He was not forced to take the usual exercise and the officers left him in peace in the cell. Three days afterwards he woke up in the night, probably from some form of nightmare, and tried to squeeze the neck of the Slovakian boy lying near to him. There was an alarm. The KGB officers were on the spot within minutes and took Mroczko out for a short while. He repeated the same performance three nights later, but this time he came back to the cell after several hours, bruised, wet and exhausted. The next morning he told me that the Russians had given him a sound beating under a cold shower and cured him, at least for the time being.

In early July the Russian lady doctor Lidya again came to see us for the routine inspection. She was annoyed with me. "Dr. Geller" she said in Russian, "I am disappointed with you. In the time you have been here, all you can say in Russian is 'zdravstvitye' (hello!)."

"I will try to improve".
"You must obtain a book and learn our language. It would be very useful to you later on."

I was not sure what she meant by "later on", but the conversation set me thinking.

If anything were needed to confirm my recently enhanced status among my companions, it was the visit of a high-ranking KGB officer a day or two later. He came in with the guard, looked around and then approached me, asking for my name and details of my alleged offence. Then, without comment, he left.

The others were convinced that I had been singled out for special attention and would soon be released. Proof of their belief and the spirit of camaraderie that bound us together in common cause was soon evident. The cell leader collected money from whoever had it and put it aside against the day I was freed. I suspected, however that the visit was purely routine, and so it turned out to be.

We had all been suffering from the summer heat, aggravated by overcrowding. Requests to the authorities met with no response, and tension mounted. On a morning in the second week of July, the whole of Block 49 refused to accept the usual meal of tea and bread. Experienced and hardened prisoners, tapping messages through the walls of adjacent cells in Morse code, had apparently undermined the system. To the Russians, it was incomprehensible. Hours of questioning followed. Some of my cellmates did not return after this, being placed in different cells or transferred to other prisons. After three days, when the fuss had died down, the guard came to remove eight prisoners from our cell. It was a minor victory, but worthwhile. That night I confided to my pillow, stained with the tears of past hopes continually thwarted, that it needed so little to be done for a prisoner to raise himself from despair to joy.

During August I was again called for questioning under surveillance of the guard. In the courtyard I passed a prisoner I remembered as an acquaintance from Cracow. He recognised me too and called out "Hello Dr. Geller". For this he was stopped by his guard and made to stand with his face to the wall.

Standing in the now familiar office before the same KGB official as before, I was asked identical questions, to which I replied similarly. He persisted with the insinuations of political activity. "what organisations did you belong to in Cracow, Dr. Geller?"

"Only the Polish Medical Association, as I told you before."

He regarded me sternly. "Memory can play tricks. Doubtless you were confused after your arrest, or perhaps you are just reluctant to tell me the truth."

"I have already told the truth, on several occasions. I am not interested in politics, only in continuing my work as a doctor."

At this he changed his tack and became interested in the others sharing my cell. Please could I acquaint him of every detail, however trivial. He was particularly concerned with my impression of Mr. K. , whose bearing suggested a more exalted position in Polish society than the humble clerkship he admitted to. When he passed on to the few Czechs in the cell and their political views I was not able to help, commenting that like most of us, they were primarily concerned for the welfare of their families and the speedy conclusion of the war.

My interviewer passed on to social matters. How did prisoners pass

their time? I explained about the talks, where we discussed each other's occupations, and added that I would like to learn Russian. At this his face relaxed into a smile. "It is a fine language, Dr. Geller. Provided you have been telling the truth, there is no reason why you should not live a happy life in Russia after a short sentence."

"Have you sentenced me already?"

"That is not for me to decide. You will be advised of the court's verdict."

And so I was. The prison hospital was the last place I might have expected to hear the solemn pronouncement of my sentence for a "crime" that I had never acknowledged to myself as having committed, but in September I found myself there as a patient. The pain had begun in the right side, starting in the back and radiating to the side of the abdomen and into the right testicle. This was accompanied by an urge to micturate (micturation: morbid desire to pass water frequently.) I realised that I had contracted renal colic, as I perspired profusely in the abnormally hot conditions of the cell, and had been unable to replace the lost fluid from the meagre ration of water.

I was still feeling very ill when a judge entered the ward and read my sentence at the bedside. For my crime, the punishment was to three years in a corrective labour camp. Such a sentence was a minimum. "Do you accept the sentence?" I was asked.

My fellow prisoners had advised that in such a circumstance, refusal could lead to a longer term in prison, and my dearest wish was to be done with it all and breathe fresh air again. So I accepted, and completed my recovery without further harassment.

## G.P. IN GENERAL RUSSIAN PRISON CAMPS

## CHAPTER 2

In October 1940, prisoners were taken by lorries to the Odessa railway station and loaded into trucks. The transport included a mixed batch of different nationalities – Ukranians, Poles, Czechs and Lithuanians. Daily rations of bread were distributed before departure. As soon as we left Odessa, I developed a second attack of renal colic. Fellow prisoners knocked on the closed doors of the truck, asking the guards for help, drawing the cold response "he's not going to die". Eventually, after a few hours, the pain subsided without treatment.

The sanitary conditions in the cattle trucks were dreadful. Washing facilities were limited as the water was supplied only once daily and there was not enough for drinking or brushing up one's hands when needed. Bread was distributed, about 300 g. daily, and occasionally watery soup or kipiatok (warm water) for drinking. There was no doctor or nurse attached to the transport, and no-one called at the carriage to find out whether any help was needed. Sleeping was difficult as we were packed more than sixty persons to one truck, without blankets, and dependent for air on what filtered through the tiny barred window. After a journey of several days we arrived at the labour camp of KRASNYJ PAXAR KUYBYSHEVSKAYA OBLAST Molotowsky Rayon.

My first welcome to the camp was not very encouraging. While I had a shower before being allocated to a barrack, my warm boots were snatched by a Russian zulik (petty thief). I was very upset but in a few days a pair of shoes was provided for me as replacements. Like the other prisoners I was also equipped with a short padded coat called a 'tyelogreyka' in Russian.

To begin with I was treated like an ordinary prisoner and could only wait patiently for some development. Bread was distributed in the morning. For the midday meal we had to queue up to get Russian kasha, equivalent to porridge, and some soup. I slept in the general barracks on a plank bed with blankets provided for everyone, which was a considerable improvement. On the fifth or sixth day after my arrival I was summoned to see the Chief Medical Officer of the camp, Dr. Viktor Pavlovich, a Russian doctor who was not a prisoner and who spoke Polish.

I found him to be a really cultured man who talked to me in a very friendly fashion. I had no documents to show him as my identity card and

other papers had been taken away by Stalin's security officers on my arrest and had not been found in my dossier. Dr. Pavlovich apologised for the fact that he had to test my medical knowledge in order to make sure that I was capable of working as a doctor. I passed my "exam" on cardiac and renal subjects, but my knowledge of pellagra* was not up to the required standard for a doctor who was going to work as a G.P. in a labour camp.

Dr. Pavlovich, who was about 45 years of age, gave me the impression of wanting to help me. He could not show this in an ostentatious way as my interview took place in the presence of a man in military uniform who, while not asking me any questions, must have been a KGB Officer.

I was advised to learn Russian and to study pellagra. I learnt Russian quickly, as my own language was Slavonic (Polish) and I had the help of some Polish prisoners who already knew Russian well and used to come to my room to help me. I had gained enough command of it within some four weeks to be able to write medical histories accurately, to do some paper work, and to converse.

At the beginning of my stay, there were over two thousand prisoners in the camp, and to deal with the lot when needed there were two categories of medical employees. The first were "free" medical employees, living locally or coming from different parts of Russia. Some of them were civilian employees, others army doctors, nurses and felchers (doctors' assistants or rather more experienced male nurses). The second category consisted of prisoner doctors (Polish), Polish dentists, felchers, and other auxiliary staff. One of the three Polish doctors was a Dr. Mantinband, an ophthalmologist, who helped me initially with my Russian, but soon after my arrival he was transferred to a Russian central hospital. The other Polish doctor was a medical officer from Silesia, with whom I got on well.

Mr. Chernishev, a felcher in his fifties, took charge of me almost paternally, guiding me gently as to how to proceed, but above all giving me an idea about the nature of the work in the camp. I was instructed by the Medical Officer to take morning and evening surgeries, and in addition to look after one of the hospital barracks.

Morning surgeries started about 4.45. – 5.30. a.m. before the first shift of prisoners went off to outside work – building, factory work etc, –

*Caused by vitamin and nutrition deficiency.

always accompanied by guards. The evening surgery commenced at 5.30. – 6.30. p.m., or even later, and was intended for prisoners on return from their work, and also for men on the second night shift. The surgeries were always crowded, but I listened in my necessarily limited time to my patients and tried to relieve their anxieties with a mixture of sympathetic words and bromides. For some of the prisoners, attendance at the surgery was merely an excuse, an attempt to get a certificate of incapacity for work for even a few days, but unfortunately, I was not in a position to please everyone. It was a great relief to be able to give a prisoner a chance to clean his bunk in the barracks, to write a letter to his family, to wash his shirt and have a rest.

The doctor/patient relationship played a very important role in the camp. I tried not to use medical jargon when talking to the patients as this might not always have been comprehensible to them. To be prepared to listen and talk to those in distress was of the greatest importance, and I was always prepared to discuss their problems and complaints. I treated my patients in the camp along unconventional lines, but at the same time I avoided undue familiarity, as advised by Mr. Chernishev. Had I not done so, I would have lost their respect. A sense of discipline had to be preserved. Mine was a very difficult job, and I realised that I was vulnerable in being responsible for every certificate issued for incapacity to work. I knew that I would be checked by Dr. Avchennikova, a major in the KGB, and I had to be careful not to overdo it. A list of prisoners certified unfit for work by the doctors and felchers was presented every morning in her office.

I tried to be more liberal and less restrictive with the group of patients aged 40 – 50, or above, and rather cautious with the younger group, unless I found some genuine reason for incapacity. The older prisoners needed more attention and above all more moral support. Admission of those selected to the hospital for 7–14 days, or longer if possible, was very effective in ameliorating their despair. Clean bunks, warmer accommodation, washing facilities, better food and contact with other patients in the wards made a tremendous difference both to their health and mental outlook.

The main complaints were muscle and joint pains, colds, coughs, weakness, loss of weight, but particularly many symptoms of nutritional disorders related to vitamin deficiencies – bleeding gums, gingivitis, minute petechiae under the skin, nail plates, haemorrhages in the thigh muscles, diarrhoea and lassitude. The majority of the prisoners prior to their arrival in our camp had already spent several months in one or more prisons where, in some cases, the early symptoms of real nutritional

deficiences had already shown themselves. The medicines and tablets necessary were dispensed by an experienced nurse or felcher. For scurvy, the only available vitamin was from rosehips, and pneumonia was treated with injections of camphor oil.

In November I was allocated to one of the hospital barracks and put in charge of it. As far as possible I organised it in the manner in which I had been trained but, at the same time, I had to adjust myself to the existing conditions in the camp. I arranged separate wards for cases of febrile infections, scurvy and other vitamin deficiencies such as pellagra and nutritional disorders, cardiac conditions, chest and renal disorders. I had to make my rounds every morning and afternoon assisted by the matron, Natasha, junior free nurse Lydia, of a Russian prisoner nurse, Ksenia. I had to get up early for the morning surgery and after this was over I returned to the hospital. On my return from morning surgery I had to read Russian, prepare medical reports and papers, and after that I had my breakfast, which was brought to me by a member of the ancillary staff.

The Russian prisoner felcher, Yosef, an experienced nurse, was also in charge of morning and evening surgeries like myself at the same establishment. Being more skilled in the medical work in the camps, he warned me in a friendly way to be careful in issuing many medical certificates of incapacity for work to the prisoners. The list of those off work was checked daily by the KGB, and every pair of hands not working was missed by the authorities. He also mentioned that there was a Polish doctor before me who wrote out numerous certificates of unfitness for work. He was punished by the KGB and transferred to the north for general labour.

I thought that when I got more settled in my work and respected by the medical authorities of the camp I would be in a better position to deal with the prisoner's problems.

I tried to be careful in the meantime and to avoid any complicated social disputes with the patients.

My first unexpected problem occured after I had been in the camp for only three weeks, when the Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Pavlovich, fainted. When he came round he gave instructions to the male attendant to call me immediately. In the meantime the Russian doctors turned up, among them Dr. Avchennikova. As I had arrived on the spot first, at the specific request of the Chief Medical Officer, I expressed my opinion that the cause of the fainting fit might have been caused by dehydration following severe bouts of diarrhoea. I also suggested what sort of investigation

and treatment might be required. Two or three hours later I was called to Dr. Avchennikova's office.

"You exceeded your duties, Dr.Geller, in presuming to give advice to our Russian doctors", she rebuked me.

"I am sorry you should think that."

"You are a prisoner here, like any other prisoner except that you are qualified as a doctor."

"I was called in by Dr. Pavlovich, as he relies upon my judgement. I intended no offence to the other doctors."

She looked at me sternly, "Please make sure that you remember your position in future."

Two weeks later, on his recovery, Dr. Pavlovich was transferred to another camp.

One day a Polish prisoner, Kowalski, who had been sentenced to ten years hard labour, ran amok and threw himself at the barbed wire fence. He was shot in the chest by the guard from the tower and died almost instantly as a result of massive haemothorax (an effusion of blood in the pleural cavity.)

When I saw him he showed no signs of life. He was pulseless with staring pupils, but Dr. Avchennikova ordered me to revive him with injections, which, I refused to do as the prisoner was obviously dead. At the medical meeting on the same day she raised the question of discipline and obedience and censured a "prisoner doctor", not mentioning my name, for refusing to carry out her instructions. She gave me a warning that in the future every such request was a command and had to be complied with. Otherwise a suitable punishment would be meted out. A few days later, a Russian died in my wards, of pneumonia. I was ordered by Dr. Avchennikova to carry out in her presence artificial respiration and cardiac massage in the theatre. I felt humiliated but I had no alternative. I worked on the dead man for about 45 minutes, perspiring profusely and checking the time on my wristwatch. I was quite sure at the time that Dr. Avchennikova did not expect any miracle from the procedure she had insisted upon, but that it was a source of satisfaction to her since, by punishing me, she felt that her authority had been established.

Some of the Poles, knowing the Russian language, used to come to my room in the evening in the first few weeks of my stay in the camp. One day I was called to the KGB officer who warned me about these frequent meetings. I disputed it saying "you expected me to learn Russian quickly but you didn't provide me with a Russian teacher. As there are some

Poles in the camp who speak the language fluently, it helps a great deal to improve my Russian." The KGB officer accepted my statement, as this was quite true. There were no possibilities whatsoever of becoming involved in any underground work, and I therefore had no more difficulties on this subject.

I realised I still had to learn to get used to the fact, and never forget it, that I was a prisoner and must therefore carry out my duties in such a way as not to become involved in friction or controversy and so expose myself to punitive action from the camp authorities. However, the events which followed demonstrated that this was unfortunately not always avoidable.

The work in the wards was more relaxing, and with great satisfaction I watched the progress of the debilitated patients. When after two or three weeks' stay in the hospital they showed definite improvement and their daily recordings were satisfactory, they were discharged with a recommendation to be assigned to light work for the next seven to fourteen days. From time to time my patients were inspected by Dr. Termoserebian, a Russian lady doctor of Armenian origin, to see whether they were genuinely ill, and whether further stay in the hospital was justified. From my second month's stay in the camp she did not trouble to hide her animosity towards me. It was , of course, impossible to retain patients with minor ailments, or those making a good recovery, for long periods of time, as the beds were needed for more severe cases. However, I was able to keep some patients such as Michael Zawadzki for weeks, or even longer, and I even made up my mind to fight the Armenian lady doctor, if she put pressure on me to have them discharged and sent back to work before they were really fit. Michael was a most pleasant and cultured young man, who was admitted totally exhausted, he very much appreciated my discreet help in enabling him to regain his strength. My free time I continued to use in polishing up my Russian, reading routine medical books and all the available papers on pellagra.

On Dr. Termoserebian's round in my wards, she was checking up mainly Poles and especially Polish Jews. She stopped at Michael Zawadzki's bed and after a superficial examination declared that the patient was fit and should be discharged.

I tried not to let her see the anger I was feeling, "I'm afraid I cannot agree with your diagnosis, Madam" I protested. "This man is still weak, his chest condition has not yet cleared up, and he is still feverish in the evenings."

She gave me a scornful look, her face turned red, and she said in her most commanding voice, "you are here to obey my orders. Remember that you are merely a prisoner here, like your patient."

"I must defer to your greater medical experience, Madam," I replied, inwardly seething. "If you think that the patient should be discharged, perhaps you would kindly sign the discharge papers. I cannot do so."

At this, her eyes flashed, and she stalked out of the ward in an obvious temper.

I had the feeling that I might be moved following this controversy and only hoped that the KGB officers would not send me for general labour. I had a strong premonition that some kind of punishment was on the way.

Some of the prisoners received letters from their families which improved their morale. One day there appeared in the surgery a Mr. Eder, a man of German extraction, over 50, and an asthmatic. He confided to me that he was employed in the camp censorship, in the German section, and that all my letters written in Polish to my family were destroyed. He suggested that in future I should write in German, and further advised me that my family should reply in German. He promised me that he, himself, would deliver the letters to me provided I treated him for his asthma and let him have the best available medication for this condition. I trusted him and thought there was no risk in this offer. Within eighteen or nineteen days I received the first news from my family, and again heard from them a short time before their deportation inside Russia.

Almost all the high ranking security officers and non-medical camp senior clerks and their families were under my care. On many occasions out of gratitude for my treatment they offered me tins of caviare which I refused to take, saying that I had never had it in Poland and it was very expensive, and I did not want to acquire a taste for it. They also offered me cigarettes which I did not accept, being a non-smoker. I should mention here that as a prisoner I was paid "high wages" in camp terms, i.e. 50 roubles per month. With this 50 roubles I could buy about five or six jars of jam in the camp shop, but there was no need for me to do so as the food supplied was sufficient for my needs. I was also appointed as a sanitary inspector of the camp kitchen and bakery. One of my duties was to taste different dishes and diets. The various diets were prepared and distributed to prisoners according to their jobs, their output of work and general health.

Midday meals were intended mainly for night shift workers, and evening meals for those returning to the camp about 5 – 5.30 p.m. from the daily tasks. As I have already mentioned, the meals were distributed among others according to the prisoners' output, and they were sometimes not sufficient for the young adolescent prisoners. Those who had the money were able to supplement their ration by purchasing some food, such as sausages, jams etc., at the camp shop at reasonable prices. Those who suffered from pellagra, mainly the severe cases, were kept in the hospital where the food was richer in calories and also adjusted to their vitamin requirements, but this higher-calorie food was not always available. There was also a greater variety in the food in the hospital.

Food varied according to the deliveries to the camp. It consisted mainly of good cereals with oil, which were a daily dish, mainly millet. Fish was distributed twice or thrice a week, supplemented for a period with sheep's liver, which almost every prisoner had for the main meal two or three times weekly. Green vegetables were almost non-existent, though potatoes were available from time to time. The daily ration of bread was from 400 – 600 grms.

Prisoners were permitted to receive monthly parcels from their families, but this was of most benefit to the Russian prisoners, as it would have taken months for the families of Polish prisoners to find out the whereabouts of the brothers, husbands and fathers. Consequently, very few Poles in the camp received a parcel from their families. The most productive workers were called "Stakhanovites" and they were awarded a high calorie diet. My own food vouchers were in that class. As I had the job of tasting different dishes, I did not need to make use of my vouchers and offered them to various Polish prisoners and sometimes to Russians.

On one occasion in December I was awakened after midnight by an auxilliary male nurse prisoner, Fizula, to check a prisoner who was the manager of the camp bakery and was held in the security officer's room on suspicion of alcohol abuse. Fizula asked whether I was aquainted with the standard camp test for alcohol, which he told me about. On my appearance, the security officer requested me to examine the prisoner, who was well known to me. Whenever he found out that a new batch of Polish prisoners had arrived in the camp, he used to deliver to my room about two dozen bread rolls. I had my secret liaison officer, a Polish boy, who had my instructions to distribute the rolls amongst the hungry arrivals. I felt embarrassed that I had to examine him, but it was plainly my duty to do so.

It was an offence to drink alcohol, but some prisoners occasionally managed to aquire it from outside. There were no signs of inebriation in this case, though I could smell vodka when the prisoner breathed into a wet glass, the simplest method applied for detecting alcohol. I gave my opinion to the officer and found out later that the prisoner was punished with forty-eight hours in a dark isolation ward on bread and water.

I became friendly in the camp with a Russian prisoner aged 33 whose name was Grigori. He was the officer responsible for the water tower. One day he showed me a letter from his wife in which she told him that she had made the acquaintance of a man who wanted to be her husband and a father to their 8-year old daughter. She thought she ought to marry him and was sure he would understand her position. Five years was a long time for a young wife to wait for a prisoner husband. Grigori accepted it, having no choice, convinced that on his release from the camp his wife would change her mind and come back to him. Poor Grigori.

Some evenings the night guard would knock on my door, ostensibly to find out how I was, but more probably to establish whether there was a gathering of my countrymen or if I was transmitting messages to the outside world! There was another Geller in the camp, a relative of mine. He was a pleasant young fellow, employed as a hairdresser. I advised him not to call to my room in the hospital in the evenings, as I did not want to be involved with the KGB.

One evening in January 1941, three Russian prisoners were admitted to the hospital. They came from a harsh disciplinary camp for prisoners who refused to work, where they were kept on a low calorie diet. According to the medical report they were found in the snow in a semi-comatose condition. I was on duty in the hospital and Mr. Chernishev, who was really marvellous in his concern for my welfare, arrived to find out whether I could cope. He was also worrying about my general health, and gave me some guidance about the treatment of pellagra cases, having wide knowledge and experience in nutritional deficiencies. In his approach to prisoners (whom he treated as human beings) his behaviour was a mixture of wisdom and benevolence. As I was so keen to do everything possible to keep these pellagra cases alive, he suggested that I try among other remedies an adrenalin injection into the left ventricle but to do it slowly, warning me at the same time to carry out that therapy in the presence of the duty nurse and not to be disappointed if by the morning all three were dead. From his own experience and observations of advanced cases of pellagra, recovery seldom occurred. By the morning two patients were dead, but the third survived although

he was confused and showed signs of dementia. However he remained alive, his condition gradually improved, and eventually he was transferred to a central hospital.

In the past few weeks, I had seen quite a number of fresh cases of scurvy, pellagra and patients with oedematous (unnaturally swollen) legs secondary to malnutrition caused by a low protein intake.

The advanced pellagra patients displayed mental fatigue, apprehension, depression, inability to concentrate, loss of memory, diarrhoea with prolonged bleeding, and in the more advanced stages disorientation, confusion and dementia. Clinically, there were characteristic skin lesions on the parts of the body exposed to sunlight, which were separated from the healthy skin by a distinct border. The lesions, however, varied, and in the initial phase they were red, thereafter changing to a reddish brown pigmentation. When the patient deteriorated, these were replaced by a precise brown colouration. Some of them developed fissures in the pigmented skin. The Russian doctors in the camp summed up the pellagra picture as mnemonic "5D", Dermatitis, Diarrhoea, Dementia, Dysfunction of the endocrine glands, and Depression. Pellagra sufferers were given large doses of nicotinic acid by oral and intravenous routes. There were also recorded a few cases of peripheral neuritis.

During the morning surgery I had to see a young Russian prisoner, named Yakovlenko, who was then 17. He complained of general fatigue and headache. Just before starting my examination I noticed his slightly swollen face and oedema of both his legs. His B.P. was raised and his urine showed proteinuria. I handed him a letter for admission to my ward, making a tentative diagnosis of pre-uraemia. About 15 minutes later Yosef the felcher from the other consulting room, rushed into my surgery and asked me whether I knew that Yakovlenko had been discharged as fit the day before from the wards of the Russian lady doctor, Termoserebian. Yosef warned me to be prepared for the most unpleasant repercussions as a result of my diagnosis. At 9 a.m. I was called from the hospital to Dr. Avchennikova's office where she upbraided me in very strong terms.

"Geller," she began, "are you out of your mind? Must you always be reminded that you are a prisoner? Once again by your actions you have shown disloyalty to a respected and experienced free lady doctor."

I tried to justify myself. "I was completely unaware that Yakovlenko had been discharged as fit only yesterday. He was certainly in poor

health when I saw him this morning. It is my responsibility to make an objective diagnosis of every patient I see."

She stared at me stonily, saying nothing. The seconds ticked by like the passing of hours. I was convinced she had some unpleasant punishment in mind. At last it came to me that anger in the face of callous injustice does nothing but raise the adrenalin level in one's system. The situation called for a more subtle response, and what befits the slave better than the mask of humility?

"Perhaps I was mistaken in admitting the boy to hospital," I said. "It is always possible to make human errors."

Still she said nothing, and so having said all I needed to, I left her office.

About two hours later, Yakovlenko developed convulsions, and with my diagnosis of uraemia he was admitted to an outside central hospital. Dr. Avchennikova softened after this episode and I had the impression that she respected me more during the rest of my stay in the camp. But this was not the end of the story.

About a week later after the Yakovlenko's case of uraemia, Dr. Termoserebian's animosity towards me burst into the open. She called at my wards and started checking my patients one by one, making remarks that one third of them were in good health and should be discharged. When she finished her rounds with me she stopped me in the corridor and ordered me to do a post-mortem on one of the prisoners who had died in her wards. She said smiling, "You will have to do a post-mortem in your room, as we have nowhere else available. Don't worry. The room will be washed clean and painted, and you will be able to sleep in there again next day. After all, you are a prisoner and you have to get used to it. For the night after the post-mortem we shall accommodate you in the office room."

I could hardly manage to sleep in my room for the next ten nights.

By the end of February 1941 I already spoke fluent Russian and thought my position was now strong enough to begin to fight for my prisoner's rights. I did not want to upset Chernishev and so did not consult him about my decision. I made an appointment to see Dr. Avchennikova, who was surprised to see me. I trusted her more in the aftermath of the Yakovlenko affair, and felt that she would not do me any real harm. My request was to be relieved from the morning Surgeries. I

was sure that there was no replacement for me and also that the security officers would not give their consent to sending me away for general labour. I told her about my long hours of work and said that I did not have enough time for study, resting and sleep. However, if she thought it was impossible to take me off the morning surgery duties, I would not mind being transferred for general work.

Dr. Avchennikova smiled and said that she had to give me a general check-up in order to assess my fitness for general work. I assured her that I was in good physical condition but she insisted on an examination. I had to strip off my shirt while she examined me and entered the findings in my records; probably my grade and physical fitness which was in every prisoner's record. Thereafter with a friendly smile she announced her verdict on the spot – that as from the next morning I was discharged from taking morning surgeries, which would alleviate my mental and physical condition. As a result I was able to devote more time to the wards and also to the evening surgeries. I came across more and more new cases of scurvy both in the surgery and the wards. I prescribed copiously rosehip tablets, which, as I have said earlier, was the only vitamin C which was available.

Sexual problems were dealt with fairly strictly. Relations between prisoners were forbidden and also between prisoners and partners having a free status. If sexual relations were proved after investigation, both partners were answerable for the "offence". The punishment consisted of moving the persons involved, separately, to an isolation ward for several days on bread and water. One of my nurses in the camp, a prisoner called Ksenia, was involved with a Russian prisoner, a photographer, and spent one or two nights with him. When it came to light, an order was given by the authorities to punish both offenders. Ksenia called at the surgery begging me for a certificate to the effect that she was unwell, so that she would escape from the disciplinary punishment which would be imposed on her. She blamed me for the affair as I had declined to make love with her, so I was faced with Hobson's choice and was forced to help her with a certificate, which was accepted. I cautioned her at the same time that it would be impossible for me to provide similar certificates in the future as this would be against both the rules and my principles.

In the meantime a mass vaccination programme against typhoid and paratyphoid was started in the camp and injections were given by a Russian lady doctor assisted by a felcher. As it happened, one of the Russian prisoners from my wards developed an anaphylactic shock within minutes of the injection. I was requested urgently by the matron to

see him and I asked her on the telephone to prepare an adrenalin injection. Unfortunately, on arrival I found him dead. I prepared a medical report on the deceased and his past history, and concluded that the cause of death was anaphylaxis* following an acute reaction to the typhoid and paratyphoid vaccination. I was ordered to appear in the hospital a few hours later by a high ranking medical officer, Dr. Aleksei Aleksandrovich, dressed in military uniform, who wished to see me urgently. As soon as I arrived he requested me to read my medical report, which I did. I was ordered to tear it up and prepare a new one as the cause of death in his opinion was malaria, and he delivered a short talk on this disease, which according to him was unknown to me. To take it more persuasive he assured me that the dead man came from the southern part of Russia where malaria was endemic. He did not blame me for my error as I had probably never seen malaria in Poland. The officer made it clear that this was an order, and I understood that our meeting had to remain confidential. I assured him I would prepare a fresh medical history and, on parting, he was very friendly as I had not disputed his authority.

I was mistaken in thinking that this was the end of the matter. The next morning I was summoned to the security office to face three high ranking officers – I daresay all possessing a wide knowledge of medicine.

"Who made you write this medical report?" demanded one of the officers, handing the report to me. I was taken aback. Nobody else had been present during my encounter with Dr. Aleksandrovich.

"The report was written of my own free will and to the best of my knowledge," I replied.

"Indeed. Why don't you say straight out that someone in the medical profession preferred it to be known that the cause of death was malaria rather than an anaphylactic shock?"

"The answer I have given to the first question covers the second also."

"Very well. Now perhaps you will tell us who made you tear up your original medical report."

This was a tricky one. It would have been easy to implicate Dr. Aleksandrovich, who no doubt would have denied it in such a way as to cause more trouble for me. I made a non-committal reply. "I have not discussed the case with any doctor."

*Anaphylaxis = an unpredictable and most severe hypersensitive reaction to any serum or any other injection (i.e. penicillin). It can be rapidly fatal and is characterised by flushing, urticaria, angiooedema, bronchospasm and cardio-respiratory arrest.

The questioner nodded, as though understanding what was behind my answer. "And have you ever, in your medical practice, come across an anaphylactic death?"

"Certainly. I remember in . . . ."
"You are required to answer 'yes' or 'no'," the security officer interrupted. "Lectures are not required."
"The answer is yes."

Shortly after this I was dismissed to return to my work. I had a curious feeling that the whole incident, so avowedly confidential, had somehow been accurately charted by the security people.

At the beginning of March I suffered further degradation from Dr. Termoserebian, who made me perform a second post-mortem in the room where I had my meals, where I slept, rested and studied. My private life was thoroughly upset, and the sickly smell of dead flesh hung about for days. I was almost in despair, and fearing that I might be submitted to further humiliation, I decided that the only solution was to apply to the security officer for transfer to another camp. Mr. Chernishev, the free senior felcher, warned me against doing anything precipitate. His interpretation of the situation was that since the Yakovlenko affair, Dr. Termoserebian had lost her popularity, while my own medical work was very much respected and appreciated by the officers, clerks and by Dr. Avchennikova herself. He finally persuaded me to ignore the incident and to continue with my work as usual. His trust in me was very evident,as on several occasions he had asked me to see the private patients whom he brought to the camp from where he was living. He just wanted to have my opinion and I understood that it had to be kept secret.

Suddenly, I had news from my family that they had been deported and were in exile in Russia. I decided to make an application for a transfer as a means of allowing me to spend the remainder of my sentence with my family in exile, and knowing one Russian lawyer, a prisoner, I asked him to prepare two such applications for me. One I posted through the normal channel and the other I intended to send by an outsider, as I was not sure whether the first one would get through the Russian censorship. I had never asked any Russian officer for favours, but this time I made up my mind and approached one of the officers who was a patient of mine. I explained that I had already posted one application from the camp and would be obliged if he would be willing to send a copy of it from outside to my family. I found out later that my parents received a letter from Kalinin (Home Office) who rejected the request, but I received no answer myself. Probably the application was stopped by the camp censorship.

There was one category of patients who, whatever you did, such as keeping them in the hospitals, sometimes for several weeks, for minor ailments, still demanded more and more privileges. On the other hand, patients of a low social class, in whatever way you helped them, were always grateful, happy and appreciative. I remember on my first two days in the camp when one of the good hearted professional criminals with whom I had spent a few days in the same cell in the Polish prison, and thereafter some months in Odessa, ran after me in the camp and forced me to take a loan from him to buy myself some food from the camp shop, as he thought I looked pale and exhausted. As I hesitated to accept his offer he insisted saying: "You will have to be strong and in good health. You'll be our doctor and we shall need you." I went to the shop and purchased some bread and jam. There were in the camp some so-called intellectuals who had plenty of money, but they never suggested giving any help when it was needed. How glad I felt when I was established as the camp doctor and thus was able to help those most in need whenever possible. As soon as I received my first salary I went to the "gentlemanly criminal" to repay the loan. "You remember" he said to me "in Poland there was a custom to pay by instalments. It must be applied here as well."

One morning during my rounds in the wards, Natasha, the matron, noticed that I was scratching myself frequently. She was a pretty young blonde Russian nurse and most helpful in the work. We often discussed medical problems and I found her very cooperative. She was dedicated to her work and treated all the patients in the same way, making no distinction between Russians or Poles. Natasha was proud of my work, and if any official arrived for an inspection of the hospital barracks, and there were several, my wards were always visited, and the official subsequently expressed satisfaction to the matron and to me for the standards we had achieved. We discussed after our rounds how best to help the debilitated patients, and usually found ourselves in agreement.

The discharge of patients from the hospital wards was in the majority of cases my province. From time to time she asked about my life in Poland. Could I afford to go to the theatre once or twice monthly, or to the cinema or a nightclub for dancing? Yes, I enjoyed these activities and the social life with my university colleagues. There were few luxuries, but my income allowed me to have a satisfying life. While on this subject, she touched rather gently on one occasion on my political interests; whether I belonged to any political organisation, for instance. I had to tell her that I had neither the leisure not the interest for such matters.

It was after one of our afternoon rounds that Natasha asked me to

accompany her to the office. She felt embarrassed at suggesting that I might have picked up lice, and asked me to take off my shirt to see what was causing the itching. As I hesitated, she smiled. "Let's make a little bet. If I find any lice I'll give you a kiss for every one."

The idea was most attractive. "If I'd known you had that in mind, I'd have prepared a few. It's too late now."

She soon saw the evidence of scurvy with the accompanying multiple petechial lesions on the skin.

"How could you have let this develop without confiding in me?" she asked, obviously hurt.

"I didn't think it was serious enough to bother you with. We treat it among the prisoners all the time."

"But you should not count yourself among them. You are our doctor, and working much too hard." Her concern for me made her even prettier, with her lovely blond hair and regular features. I was touched by it all.

The next morning I began with a breakfast rich in Vitamin C, consisting of cucumber, carrots, tomatoes and onions, from the camp stores. After 14 days the petecchiae* had disappeared, the itching gone, and I felt much better.

Working with Natasha was one of the few pleasures in the camp routine. In the early days of March 1941, well noted in my diary, she asked me to have tea with her. We settled down in her office, discussing the medical condition of our patients, when out of the blue she said. "Would you marry me?"

I stammered out some non-committal reply while giggled at my embarrassment. "You've only a short sentence," she teased, "I'm sure I could wait that long. They might even set you free earlier."

In the same spirit I replied "If I don't have news from my girl friend by May, I might just take you up on it."

"Ah, but the winter months in Russia, Dr. Geller, are very long. If we wait until May they'll seem longer still."

There was no simple answer to this, so I changed the subject as diplomatically as I could.

**Good though our relationship was, I suspected that Natasha probably had a secret Communist Party affiliation. I had positive evidence that the Russian prisoners forming the auxiliary medical staff were reporting to the KGB all after-hours visits to me by prisoners, who were mostly Poles.**

*Marked pink spots under the skin or under mucosal membranes caused by fragile capillary bleeding.

But Natasha's behaviour towards me was friendly and open throughout my stay at Krasnyj Paxar.

Rumours began to spread that something had gone wrong with the Russo-German alliance, and that war was imminent. Of more direct consequence to us, we learned that our camp was to be wound down, and we would be transferred to the northern part of Russia. The prospect was far from attractive. Nonetheless it gave us all another talking point.

On returning from my last round in the hospital, I met Dr. Termoserebian. "Goodbye, Dr. Geller. You must be glad to be leaving this camp, and me especially."

"I bear no ill feeling." I replied.
She looked at me in a curious calculating way. "What a strange man you are."

When I returned to my room I found everything upside down. Before meeting me she had ransacked my room, accompanied by a nurse, and gone through my few possessions. If ever I had cause to hate anyone, it was her.

Then came the friendly parting from the nurses I had worked with, and a warm, last kiss from Natasha, whom I knew I should miss, as she wished me a pleasant journey and good health. We were loaded into cattle trucks, forty or fifty of us to each, and so commenced our journey to the bitter climate of Northern Russia.

As with everything in life, there was a brighter side, at least for a short time. My friendly Mr. Chernishev who had ensured my smooth induction into the camp medical routines was appointed Chief Medical Officer to our convoy.

We did not know what awaited us, but could not escape the dreary rations of bread, warm tea, and the all-pervading stink from the large container provided for releaving ourselves. As on an earlier journey, the drinking water had to be used for washing our hands, and there was never enough. At certain stations, the Chief Medical Officer inspected the wagons, but it was not until the fourth dreary day that he came to us to ask about the health of myself and the others. I complained of the disgusting lack of hygiene, and he looked at me closely. Two hours later at another station the transport officer called me to bring out my wooden trunks and all my belongings. I was led to a wagon with two clean beds, in one of which lay a patient, a Russian prisoner. I was instructed by Chernishev in the presence of the guard to look after him and report if his

condition deteriorated by knocking on the door. I could see that there was nothing particularly wrong with Andrei, the patient, and it was obvious that Chernishev wanted to give me a chance to have a rest in a more hygienic environment. A few hours before reaching our destination, when stopping at yet another station, the guard called me take to my luggage and I had to return to my original wagon Number 26. On arrival I could not find adequate words to thank Chernishev for his great kindness and care. He inspired me with fresh courage and wished me good health, before saying farewell.

We arrived in Kaninosa about the 8th or 9th May 1941, where we found the weather still grey and wintry. I had a bag of rusks, prepared by the Russian nurses for my journey, and since my fellow Poles in the wagon were hungry, I distributed it amongst them, telling them that today was my wife's birthday and that we should celebrate it. We found that we had been sent to a large transit camp already packed with inmates. A few hours after my arrival, while having a shower, a middle aged Russian lady entered. I felt embarrassed but she said "nichevo", which meant "there is nothing to worry about." I dressed quickly and was then called to the office, already knowing that the lady who had come into the shower room unannounced was indeed the Chief Medical Officer of the camp.

Her name was Dr. Sharbe Tamara Aleksandra, a rather brisk and masculine type and herself a prisoner. After checking my records from the previous camp she assumed that I must have enough experience by now as a prison doctor. She explained that I would be assigned with another colleague, a Russian doctor, to examine prisoners and classify them according to their capability for work. I asked Dr Sharbe to employ a Polish dentist, Mr. M. Rosenthal, who was then living in one of the general barracks, and who had also been with me before in the first camp, but she refused to employ him. I was allocated a pleasant single room in the officers' building where I could rest before commencing my newly assigned task the next morning. Kaninosa was an enormous transit camp into which prisoners of different nationalities from various prisons or labour camps were pouring in hundreds and thousands daily and they all had to be examined. The camp was actually inundated with these prisoners, and the necessity for assessing their fitness for work was now urgent in order to make way for newcomers.

The examination had to be extremely quick and very superficial, but this was the procedure imposed by Dr. Sharbe and carried out under her aegis. Prisoners in groups of eighty of more were inspected by a quick scan of their general appearance to make sure that they had both upper

and lower limbs. Special attention was paid to the structure of the gluteal muscles and the size of the gap between the buttocks, as this factor, a consequence of starvation was accepted as an indicator of the prisoners' general and nutritional condition. The further apart the buttocks, and the more conspicuous and wide the distance between them, the more advanced was the individual's nutritional deficiency and the consequent wasting of their muscles. If during screening a discolouration of the peripheral part of the body or significant oedema of the lower limbs was noticed, or if the person complained of dyspnoea, ausculation* of the chest was carried out. An appropriate grade of fitness for work was registered in each prisoner's dossier before transferral to another camp. The average number of prisoners screened by one doctor in that way within 2 hours could reach 200 or more. There was no real time under the circumstances for any thorough individual assessment.

Among the groups of Polish doctors I met there I should mention particularly an eminent middle aged surgeon, Dr. Adam Soltysik. He met everything that happened, however difficult or startling, with great dignity and calm. His behaviour inspired the younger (junior) doctors and he was most friendly and helpful to us all.

The constant stream of prisoners were somehow accommodated in the already overcrowded barracks with bunks and each was provided daily with 400g of bread and some soup. Groups of hundreds of selected prisoners were transferred regularly to various camps, the majority on foot with their dossiers guarded by armed escorts. On some days two or three convoys of prisoners were leaving Kaninosa camp to make room for the new arrivals.

I realised that my appointment in the present camp was temporary and I had no idea where I would be moved to after completion of my work.

I performed my allotted daily examinations and waited patiently for the day when my task would be completed. On some days I encountered in the crowd of prisoners a number of acquaintances from my native city, but I tried for security reasons not to become involved in any close communication with them but rather to convey silently, by way of an ostentatious wink, that they had been recognised and that I would give them every possible assistance. One day, while carrying out my medical task, I had the chance of introducing the dentist Mr. Rosenthal, to Dr. Sharbe. She took an instant liking to him and promised to find a suitable occupation for him, reversing her previous decision. Two days later she

*Act of listening to movements of the lungs, heart etc.

Please correct printing error: auscultation.

ordered me to move from my room to the general barracks for clerks, and shortly afterwards Mr. Rosenthal told me that he had taken it over and felt very distressed about it. Dr. Sharbe apparently expected some sexual service from him in return for the various favours she offered. The dentist was not very responsive to her advances as she was not an attractive female, but had to put up with the situation. Moreover, Mr. Rosenthal found that the light nights in the North impaired his libido. Even so, Dr. Sharbe looked after him well, providing whatever little luxuries were available, such as chocolates, cigarettes and so on.

In the meantime a very important visitor, the assistant director of medical services, arrived at the camp. It was a Dr. Aleksandra, who was not a prisoner. Her responsibility was to interview the doctors, discover their specialities, ascertain the state of their health and their knowledge of Russian, and thereafter assign them to different hospitals or camps in the North. Fizula, the auxiliary attendant, told me all the doctors except myself had been seen by Dr. Aleksandra and that now it was my turn. He advised me to be relaxed during the interview with Dr. Aleksandra as she was responsible for deciding the location of every doctor. I was pleased to find her both young and good-looking, and her attitude towards me most encouraging. She began by asking whether I would mind if she enquired about some personal details, as the medical facts were by now known to her from my dossier. Was I alright for money, cigarettes, shirts and so on? Had I perhaps left a girlfriend in Poland. She complimented me on my fluent Russian and then put a further question. Would I like to participate with her in a medical assignment provided she undertook the administration and I the medical work? Receiving my answer, she actually shook hands with me, which had never happened to me before as a prisoner. She promised to instruct Dr. Sharbe to make use of my services for another 7 to 10 days and that subsequently I would be transferred to the hospital where she would be working.

Dr. Sharbe had noticed my wristwatch a few days earlier and had taken a good look at it. Without any hesitation she said she would like to have it, offering me her very old-fashioned large man's watch plus 500 roubles. I did not like the idea of such an exchange, more especially as the offer was so unexpected. I said in reply that the watch meant a lot to me as it had sentimental value and I could not sell it. I could only offer it to her as a gift on my liberation from the camp. My colleagues, especially Dr. A. Soltysik warned me that I must not forget that I was a prisoner and that Dr. Sharbe would, in view of my refusal, most probably seek to harm me in some way. I ought, for my own sake, to have accepted the proposal. Besides its great sentimental value, I had kept my watch in spite of previous monthly, very thorough searches in Odessa. I had

learned some useful tricks from some of the hardened offenders there. We had been issued with soap of a rather soft consistency and I kept three tablets, in one of which I hid my treasure. I could identify the particular tablet of course, although to a casual glance all three pieces were identical. Before leaving Odessa every prisoner had been searched again in the huge prison courtyard. There, one of the tablets of soap was cut to pieces by the security officer but luckily he cut the wrong one. However, I later received permission to wear the watch as a "medical aid." So I was not going to yield it to Dr. Sharbe without a struggle.

Two days later I was summoned to her office where she told me to make myself ready for a long journey on foot to a hospital in the far North situated 400 km from the present camp, near Vorkuta. She said how sorry she felt about this transfer but a doctor was urgently needed in the hospital and , as I was the youngest in the camp, she had to select me and was confident that I would be able to make the journey as I was in good health. Dr. Sharbe warned me that the Polish doctor at the exit gate would not help me to remain in the camp as she would send him a message cautioning him not to do so. At the gate there was always a doctor present when a convoy of prisoners was on the way out to any destination, and he had the authority to admit the prisoner to hospital or to delay his departure if he felt that he was not in a fit condition to undertake any travelling. Dr. Sharbe was extremely firm and advised me not to complain of diarrhoea as this would do me no good. I must go. I was stunned, but perceived the cause clearly and could see no alternative, no possibility of retreat. I intended to ring up Dr. Aleksandra but Dr. Sharbe gave instructions that I should not be allowed to communicate with anyone, especially not with Dr. Aleksandra. I was again being punished for not having learnt the bitter lesson that prisoners are barely human. In retrospect I reproached myself for refusing the proposed exchange of watches. All my colleagues felt distressed about my situation but blamed me, not unkindly, for having been unwise enough to refuse the woman's demand.

I left my wooden trunks in the camp, taking only a shirt, soap, toothbrush, toothpowder and my overcoat. With a group of about 350 prisoners, mainly Russians and a few Lithuanians, I left the camp feeling very downhearted after saying goodbye to my friends. The roads were covered with snow and it was bitterly cold. On the way one of the Lithuanians, a prisoner, was taken very ill and I requested the guards to assist me in arranging admission to a nearby hospital for this particular prisoner who had all the symptoms of acute cardiac failure. The guard in response jabbed me with his rifle accusing me of organising resistance

on the march, but eventually, seeing the man fighting for breath, helped me to get him to the nearest hospital.

It was a tedious day, I had only had a piece of bread throughout the whole day but I was not hungry. By evening our echelon reached a forest after a march of 40 kms and the guards ordered us to rest. The prisoners built a fire and within minutes I fell asleep in the snow. When I woke up in the morning I noticed that part of my short padded jacket had been damaged by the fire, but it no longer mattered to me. Survival was the only thing that counted now. We moved from the forest to a hilly open area and had to wait for a doctor from a nearby hospital whose function it was to find out whether any of the prisoners in the group were unfit for a further, very long walk. While we were waiting we heard a man's voice calling in Russian "Is there a doctor here?", to which the prisoners replied "da" (yes) "there is a Polish doctor". It was Vladimir, the felcher, who was also a prisoner employed in the nearby hospital. He immediately approached me and inspected my legs which were oedematous and smothered with a petechial rash. Vladimir concluded that I needed treatment and rest, that I was not fit for further walking, and the chief medical officer would decide upon my fate. The felcher was himself anxious to get an overcoat from someone in exchange for some favours. There were a few Lithuanians among the prisoners, one of whom had two overcoats and gladly offered Vladimir one, who contacted the guard and obtained all the necessary dossiers of the prisoners who would accompany him to the hospital, including the generous Lithuanian.

In the hospital Vladimir introduced me to the chief medical officer, the senior doctor of several hospitals, Dr. Sergei Andreyevich Yakovlenko, and handed over my records and also the order sending me to a destination in the far North. Dr. Sergei exchanged a few words with me and after a while tore up the order in my presence and said cheerfully that I was not to worry. He would be pleased to have me in his hospital, and if he was not well I would have to take care of him. All the prisoners who had been selected with me were kept together in a group in the hospital. Dr. Sergei suggested that I visit the Polish hairdresser prisoner and thereafter take a shower. I was assigned to a small clean room which I shared with an intelligent felcher, Victor Victorovich and so I found myself unexpectedly in the *Komi Republic Hospital,* officially recorded as 4th Section (IV Otdjelenie).

The next morning I was introduced to the medical staff at the hospital – to Dr. Natalya Sergieyevna Nise, Dr. Nina Georgivna Kalugina, Dr. Pyotr Pyotrovich Golovina and the Polish pharmacist, Mr. Krajewski. The

whole medical staff, including clerks, nurses and auxiliary assistants, were all prisoners with various sentences of up to 5–10 years, but Dr. Yakovlenko and Dr. Golovina could move about freely without a guard. The hospital was situated in the taiga*, and the ward buildings, offices and so on were in a better condition than the barracks in Krasnyj Paxar. It was a large hospital which served 15 or 20 labour camps (some prisoners called them colonies) scattered within a radius of 10–15 km. or more. The inmates carried out various types of work, particularly building railways. In every camp there was a commandant, a prisoner, who was in charge of two or three hundred other prisoners. A felcher was attached to every such camp and attended the inmates for minor ailments. If he could not manage severe cases it was his duty to escort them on foot, accompanied by a guard, to the general hospital.

In the hospital zone next to the entrance gate was a small building for the guards. Inside there was a waiting area with a consulting room for the prisoners brought in for examination from outside, and the whole area was fenced. About 30 to 40 per cent of the patients brought to us in the morning by the various felchers were suffering from diarrhoea with a blood content. They had to file up outside the fence and had to deliver "to order" a specimen of stool in the open air; if these patients were found not to be in a satisfactory condition they were admitted to the hospital. Prisoners with other complaints were examined in the consulting room inside the zone. The hospital was guarded by watch towers at each corner, manned by vigilant Russian soldiers with machine guns.

I was in charge of several wards and one of them was for female patients as the hospital also looked after one female labour camp. To my section were attached the following staff: Elena, a nurse aged 35 (before her arrest she had been a teacher), Nikolai, a tall, stout fellow aged 50 who had learned nursing in the hospital, and Sergei, a valuable and dedicated nursing auxiliary. The medical work here was more thorough and the atmosphere more relaxed and cooperative than in the previous hospital, since all the staff and the administrators were prisoners.

My experience garnered in previous camps was beneficial and came in very useful when dealing with complicated cases. Mr. Krajewski, the Polish pharmacist, contributed significantly to the teamwork in the hospital and he prepared a list of all available pharmaceutical preparations, which made prescribing much easier. I found his services of great value not only to me but to all the prisoners. I did my rounds in the morning and the afternoon, and my relations with the senior Doctor

*Coniferous forest.

were most friendly and harmonious, as they were with the whole staff. The patients in my wards were cardiac, gastric and chest cases, occasionally severe chilblains, but primarily pellagra cases accompanied by constantly recurring motions with blood. About 200 yards from the hospital there were a few buildings mainly designated for the convalescent prisoners. In charge of the convalescents' hospital were two Polish doctors, Drs. Slawinski and Duma. The latter died a few years ago in the United Kingdom and my relations with both of them were most cordial.

On the third Sunday after my arrival in the hospital a message was delivered to the wards on my rounds to pay a visit to Dr. Yakovlenko's office. He greeted me amicably and showed me a demand note addressed to him by the KGB giving me permission to call on the wife of the quartermaster who was not very well, but who lived outside though very near the hospital, and who had expressed a wish to be seen by the Polish doctor who had recently arrived. On Sunday afternoon, escorted by a guard, I went to see the "private patient". When I arrived at the place the guard asked my hosts what time I should be collected. The quartermaster was not a prisoner and he said that he would come to the hospital with me. I examined the patient, whose history was highly suggestive of a gall bladder infection, for which I recommended the appropriate diet and medicaments.

The host and hostess, a middle-aged couple, entertained me for hours. We played chess to the accompaniment of some sentimental Russian songs in the gramaphone, and finished with tea. This was a very emotional afternoon, such as I had not experienced since my arrest. I almost had the sensation of being welcomed by close relatives, and on parting was nearly reduced to tears. The host asked me whether he and his wife could call me by my first name and enquired whether the food in the hospital was sufficient and whether I was in need of money. I tried to assure them that I was well looked after and that the salary I received from the hospital was more than adequate. Aleksei Stepanovich, the host, remarked "You see, Yuliana, the doctor does not trust us". They did not seem to accept what I said and thought I doubted their sincerity. Then they asked me whether I would be searched on my return at the gate, and my reply was that I was not aware of the usual procedure as this was my first outing. I returned together with my host to the gate, said goodbye to Aleksei, and entered the hospital zone without being searched by the guard. The next morning, after my rounds, I discovered in my room under the cushion on my bed a precious parcel containing sausage, butter, dried fruit, ham and sugar, as though it came from a supermarket in the North. Naturally it was not difficult to guess my benefactor's name.

On the following Sunday I was called again but this time to the quartermaster who was taken ill. Yuliana was in good spirits. She felt better after my treatment and , thanking me for my services, apologised for calling me again on a Sunday to see her husband, Aleksei. This time I hesitated over my diagnosis as there was nothing particularly wrong with the patient except for a mild respiratory infection and it was not until late that I realised why I had been called. I stayed for a few hours, the atmosphere was as warm as before and we had a long and friendly talk – the puzzle was solved. The couple expressed the wish to have me every week or every second week, under the pretext of illness, as a friend, to spend an afternoon with them again and so to fill me with renewed optimism and hope for a better future. I thanked Aleksei for the generous supply of delicatessen found under my cushion which really was not necessary, but he denied that it was from him, and I well understood the reason for his denial. Again I was seen to the gate by him and entered without any search. These "Harley Street" visits continued almost up to the day of my release from the camp hospital.

The prisoner patients over 40 years of age and sometimes also of the younger group requested me on my rounds to prolong their stay in the hospital even for a few days. I accepted it as a natural reaction and fight for survival. The hospital prisoner patients had their regular meals, better washing facilities, more rest, and longer sleep. I tried my best to help them out when free beds were available. Special attention was paid to the needs of the pellagra patients who required higher calorie diets.

The provisions for the patients in the hospital were satisfactory considering that Russia was now at war with Germany, and provided delivery was not hindered by transport or bad weather. Food for the patients in the hospital consisted of cereals with oil, soup with cereals, smoked fish and two or three times weekly meat such as lamb, tinned tomato juice, about 200–300 g. of bread daily, occasionally sheep's liver, and some items of nutrition that were supplied in a dry form.

The twice-daily rounds in the hospital were smooth and peaceful, being accompanied by auxiliary staff, and as we were all prisoners the atmosphere under the circumstances was relaxed and definitely more bright than in the previous camp in Krasnyj Paxar. I also had to attend emergencies in my wards in the daytime and there was no day off.

The Chief Medical Officer's sentence was ten years and his assistant's 8 years of corrective labour camp. So far no Russian doctor had been checking on patients in my wards. The patients were of different nationalities, such as Russians, Poles, Lithuanians and Estonians, young and middle aged.

The prisoners in the hospital wards slept and rested on clean, wooden bunks with blankets and the conditions were superior to those in the tents or barracks. Medicines were prescribed on the rounds and dispensed by the Polish pharmacist and distributed in the afternoon and evening by the nurses.

In the camps the prisoners were living in marquees or wooden huts up to 150–200 in one unit. A ration of bread of 400–500 g. was distributed in the morning before going to work with a hot drink. The majority were working on building railway tracks leading to the North to Workuta, which was compulsory and most laborious work in the wintry months. The older ones, whenever possible, were allocated to indoor work. On return from work there was always a hot meal ready. I found out from the patients in the hospital that in their tents, blankets were provided for the wooden bunks. When the prisoner did not feel well he had to attend the morning surgery where a felcher prisoner was in charge and if the prisoner was feverish or had some minor stomach upsets he dispensed the necessary medicaments. In more severe cases the felcher had to decide whether to keep the patient under vigilance in the camp or convey him to the hospital. As a routine he used to assemble a few patients and deliver them on foot accompanied by a guard. The patients were examined by one of the hospital doctors, in the majority of cases by me. The ones who needed hospital treatment were admitted, and the others after examination were given the required medication and taken back to the camp.

I had in my wards an almost definite case of a perforated ulcer in a man of 40 and begged Dr. Yakovlenko to arrange a transfer for him to a surgical unit, but he was not very keen on the idea. He explained his refusal thus. "If a particular patient dies on the way to hospital there will be an enquiry and we would be responsible for his death. However, if he dies where he is now, no problems would arise." The prisoner died within about 48 hours and the post-mortem confirmed the diagnosis. A perforated gastric ulcer with a heavy haemorrage in the peritoneal cavity was found.

For the past three weeks I had had to sign all the certificates for those deaths which occurred in the hospitals in the zone, even if they were not patients from my wards. The KGB officers demanded 4 copies for each deceased prisoner, so I called at their office and requested exemption from signing death certificates of patients not under my care, after a moment of hesitation they consented to my request.

A week later a female prisoner from a female labour "colony" was

brought to the hospital in a coma. I did my best, brought all my experience to bear and used everything available in the hospital including oxygen, but she died within less than an hour. It was a camp regulation to diagnose a case before making a post-mortem, but I had difficulties in making even a tentative diagnosis. On reflection, I thought I would make an attempt to trace the records of the deceased. I spent some time studying the available records and luckily among the file I spotted that of Tanya. She was about 30 years of age and had been suffering from "hysterical fits', and these few lines gave me an unexpected insight. My provisional diagnosis before the post-mortem was either a cerebral tumour or a cerebral haemorrhage due to status eiplepticus. There was no history of sugar diabetes. I carried out the post-mortem examination, as usual in the presence of two high ranking experienced officers, and a tumour was found in the brain. The pathology report about 2 weeks later was glioma. The officers congratulated me on my pre-post-mortem diagnosis, probably unaware that I had had access to Tanya's records.

While on my rounds in my wards I came across a patient – a young Pole about 28 – feverish, who had suffered from furunculosis*[1] in the past two weeks but whose urine was sugar free. He now complained of right-sided pain in the back and also in the front. I examined him thoroughly and requested Dr. Yakovlenko to have a look at the patient as I suspected a subphrenic*[2] abscess. Dr. Yakovlenko, accompanied by me, interviewed and examined the patient, Mr. Romanowski, and expressed the opinion that I might be right. I already knew that Dr. Soltysik, the surgeon, was working in a surgical unit about some 20–25 km. from our hospital and I approached Dr. Yakovlenko about the possibility of the patient being seen by a surgeon. He approved my suggestion and within 24 hours Dr. Soltysik accompanied by a guard and a nurse arrived and also made a provisional diagnosis of a right subphrenic abscess. The patient was transferred to hospital, to the surgical unit, and two days later a message was received by telephone that the Polish patient had, in fact, a subphrenic abscess and he had stood the operation well.

One day during my rounds I stopped to examine Mr. Lepp, a tall thin gentleman over 60. I was very much concerned about his health as he was in cardiac failure and his condition over the past 2 weeks had deteriorated. Mr. Lepp asked me to spare some time for him when I had finished my rounds as he wished me to enter in my Polish vade mecum

*[1]Presence of boils (furuncles) in different parts of the body.
*[2]Abscess under the diaphragm (partition separating thorax from abdomen).

his wife's address. Some of the patients in the wards knew that I registered from time to time some "mysterious facts" in that book which survived many searches, most probably because I kept it among my Russian books. Mr. Lepp had sensed that he was very ill and hoped that one day I might be set free and would then convey a last message to his wife. He wanted to tell her of the deep love and devotion he had always felt towards her throughout their married life, and he prayed daily for her good health and safety. It was a very moving moment and he felt relieved as I wrote down in his presence his wife's address: Miryam Lepp, Estonia, Kusa Joam Kurtna, Postkast 11. I had the impression that Mr. Lepp had held a ministerial post in the Estonian government before the Russians occupied Estonia. I could see that his condition was indeed worsening from hour to hour and Natalya, the doctor, offered me half a bottle of wine for him to make his last hours more tolerable and to allow him to pass away in peace.

In the second half of July a young Russian surgeon Dr. Aleksandrovich came to the hospital. He performed operations in a very primitive camp theatre. Quite often during the operations I had to open the atlas of anatomy to help him out, and nurses, always assisted him. I remember a case of echinococcus hydatid of the liver* in a female patient from my ward, aged about 50, admitted from a female camp. She complained of abdominal discomfort and pain, her cardiac condition was not satisfactory, the liver was enlarged, multiple cysts were felt on palpation, and the abdomen was distended. I requested the Russian surgeon to see the patient as I wanted his opinion. After his examination the surgeon ordered the nurse to transfer the patient to the theatre and prepare the necessary instruments for exploratory examination of the cysts. Dr. Aleksandrovich confirmed my suggested diagnosis and instructed me to carry out an exploratory aspiration of the cysts in his presence, and when that was done, the aspirated fluid was sent to the laboratory of a specialist hospital. As soon as the diagnosis was confirmed some days later he treated the patient surgically, but unfortunately she died on the fourth day after the operation. I recall having seen only one case of echinococcus*[3] disease while at medical school and this was only the second one I had come across since then.

The Russian surgeon was not a prisoner and he treated me well. The Russian government assigned him to various camp hospitals for several months to learn surgery in a rough way.

It came to my knowledge from a newcomer, a graduate pharmacist from Kiev, who was sent for six months training in the hospital, that the

*[3]Infestation of the alimentary tract with animal parasites.

majority of graduates were posted to various hospitals for training, as in the case of Dr. Aleksandrovich, just to acquire some tough experience during their stay. This was official and had to be accepted without quibble.

It was lonely in my room now as I had lost my good friend the felcher Victor Victorovich, who had been making preparations for a getaway. Victor accumulated vitamins, enough food for 10 days and took for granted that his escape would be a success. He had all the required papers with official stamps and everything planned in a most professional manner. About that time there was a KGB officer in his wards so Victor was going to make use of his uniform and take with him one patient, a prisoner whom he trusted, who would figure in his papers as a prisoner to be delivered to the court by a KGB officer, i.e. Victor. He begged me to join him but I had no intention of participating in such a folly and, on the contrary, I warned him that although he was a Russian by birth he had no chance in the present circumstances in an area covered by so many camps. In my opinion it was a tremendous risk with a very remote possibility of achieving freedom. Victor packed up one evening when he was on duty and disappeared with another prisoner. The next morning the KGB officers interrogated me to find out whether I had any knowledge of Victor's escape and naturally I had to say no. There were rumours in the hospital that 2 days later Victor was tracked down by KGB officers and their police dog within a radius of about 30 km. from his starting point, and had been seen since then by some prisoners who said that his face was bruised and that he looked very distressed and altered almost beyond recognition after those few days of semi-freedom.

Sometimes in the afternoon we doctors used to meet each other to discuss medical problems. I never talked politics and if anyone started I paid no attention and expressed no opinion. I liked talking to Natalya and Nina. Natalya, a lady of 60 with grey hair, shared her room with Nina; however they did not get on well with each other. Without any prompting, Natalya told me the short story of how she had landed here. She was friendly with a Polish princess, Lubomirska, who was arrested one day, and thereafter all her friends, among them Natalya, were interrogated and she was detained. Natalya was almost certain that Nina was spying in the hospital for the KGB and, in return for these services, she was supplied by them with cosmetics and dresses. Natalya cautioned me on more than one occasion about discussing political problems with Nina as months ago a Polish doctor had talked too much and he was posted to the North for general labour. Once the KBG officers had established the prisoners' weaknesses and profiles of their characters they made use of their services.

I moved about inside the zone with Nina just for exercise in the restricted area in which were offices, hospitals, various buildings and "private dwellings". When the weather was fine I liked to walk during the northern evenings illuminated by the Northern lights, like in the daytime, and admire the green sky and sunset. Nina knocked at my room quite often for me to go for a walk with her, or she called at the wards on my rounds and took me under her arm just for a walk and a long talk. I liked her in many ways, she was intelligent, read a lot and always had a smile for me. She was well-dressed, young and good looking, but I could not make out whether she was sincere. We were friendly, but that was all. One day after our afternoon rounds she knocked on my door and we had a very cordial talk, rather personal for the first time. She asked me about my life in Poland before my arrest and about my family. It was a very pleasant, amusing and relaxing afternoon. In turn I asked her about her family and then suddenly someone knocked at the door. It was Sergei, the male nurse, apologising for calling me as I was needed to see a patient in my ward who had suddenly deteriorated. Whether this was true or not I did not speculate on at the time, or whether it was an intentional "safety" move by the nurse. I had the impression that Sergei watched me as he was scared in case I got involved with Nina, whom he did not trust. He confided in me one day that before his detention he was in charge of a tin factory in Moscow. He was arrested by the KGB officers for alleged mismanagement and was sentenced to 5 years in a corrective labour camp. I never discussed with him his private life, but he suggested that he could accommodate me in Moscow and could help me to settle down there when the time came for me to be set free. I expressed my thanks for his good intentions saying that in the meantime I had to stay in the camp for over a year and the war was still on, and who knew what might happen during that time. Sergei respected me and in turn I treated him with courtesy and I had every confidence in him.

Sasha (diminutive of Aleksandra, or Aleksander), a free nurse who worked in the convalescent ward, called to see me one morning by appointment. She besought me with tears in her eyes for advice and effective help. According to her statement she had been raped by a prisoner and was pregnant. The Court, however, did not accept her version. It accused her of provocative and inciting behaviour, and had already sentenced her to 2 years in a corrective labour colony, to be effective after her confinement. Much as I would have liked to help her, it was now too late to begin issuing certificates. Poor Sasha!

At the end of July, I was summoned to Dr. Yakovlenko's office. There was a message from the KGB to the hospital requiring me to call at a camp situated about 12 km. from the hospital in order to see the camp

commandant who had been taken ill. I had to walk there – a sort of "globe trot" enabling me to have a good look at the taiga – while my guard, equipped with a gun, was enjoying himself on horseback conveying a "most dangerous prisoner" who might endeavour to escape. I did not mind slow jogging as the weather was fine and I had not had the opportunity for longer walks for some time. The taiga looked monotonous, the trees were dwarfish and birds were hardly seen. The guard occasionally asked me whether I was tired but otherwise said nothing. We reached the camp and I was welcomed by the commandant in a comradely way – after all we were both prisoners. I had a shower followed by lunch, after which he wanted to introduce me to the prisoners. We entered into one of the tents and he called for attention as in the army. All the prisoners then stood to attention, showing both discipline and respect.

I examined the commandant in his room, which was clean and well kept. I noted his medical history and then gave him a thorough check-up, which took me a good hour. The physical examination was highly suggestive of a peptic ulcer. I recommended a diet and promised that an appropriate medication would be prepared in the hospital so that the felcher could collect it. If some necessary drugs were required in the hospital and were not available, the next best had to be dispensed. The commandant thanked me wholeheartedly for my visit and the care taken with his examination, hoping he would make good progress. He was advised to report to Dr. Yakovlenko in 6 weeks' time about his progress and the decision would then be made as to whether an X-ray examination was necessary. I returned to the hospital to report to Dr. Yakovlenko, hoping that I would not have to answer many such calls.

The next morning a young Russian prisoner was admitted to my wards suspected of a self-inflicted injury – cutting off one of his fingers. The case was investigated by the Court and the proceedings proved that the prisoner had done it deliberately so as to be admitted to the hospital for a long rest and subsequently to be assessed for light work. He was sentenced by the Court to an additional one year, to be spent in a corrective labour colony. A Russian lawyer prisoner whom I met in the first camp had mentioned to me the problem of self-inflicted injuries carried out in despair by exhausted prisoners. I could hardly believe it at that time, but then I had never had to endure the physical hardship and back-breaking toil of the great mass of prisoners on the pitifully inadequate rations that led to the malnutrition I was always treating.

There were days when I worked with enthusiasm and was able to give help to my fellow prisoners, which was very satisfying. But there were

also moments when I lacked stimulation. Dr. Yakovlenko, although always friendly, tried to "open my eyes" as a non-Russian who did not know enough about Russia. He mentioned newspaper reports that a pact had been arranged between Marshal Stalin and the Polish General Sikorski that all Polish prisoners in Russia since the war would be set free in due course in order to join the Forces and fight the Germans. The doctor looked round in his office just to be safe and assure himself there were only the two of us in the room. He said "Yasha, listen to me. I must tell you, in case if you are not already aware of it, that the Russians are the biggest liars in the world." He questioned the dependability of the agreement, saying that in Russia it might take years between the making of such a pact and its fulfilment. Then he spoke about Russian society, about the Russian regime, the spirit of the times, and the trend of the present local and central authorities. He added "Yours' is a small sentence, the shortest of the whole medical staff here. I would be surprised it they let you go after the termination of yours. They would offer you a good position and location and if you turn it down they might invent some reason to prolong your prisoner status." He continued, "we respect you here as a true colleague, and we like the way you are treating all the patients with the same care, without regard to their nationality. We trust you and appreciate your thoroughness. Think very carefully how you respond to the KGB officers, and don't be over enthusiastic in advance in case the amnesty does not prove to be genuine."

It was already August 1941 when I was called to Dr. Yakovlenko's office after my morning rounds. I was required to attend the security office, although no-one seemed to know the reason for this summons. I felt disturbed as I was told that this was something out of the ordinary, and even the Senior Medical Officer had no idea why I had been called. He mentioned however that this was a branch KGB office but rather more extreme that the usual one.

I arrived at the security office, outside the hospital, escorted by a guard. In an almost dark room there was a middle-aged officer I had never met before who ordered me to make a full examination of a Russian prisoner of about 30 years of age who was sitting in the same room. This examination was performed in the presence of the officer, who forbade me to ask the prisoner any questions. To begin with I was puzzled and tried to guess what lay behind it. The officer was a witness to the proceedings so that I did not have any opportunity to acquaint myself with the prisoner's situation or the reason for this consultation, which lasted a considerable time. When I had finished, the prisoner was

moved to another room and I had to write my report. By this time I was almost completely confirmed in be belief judging by my previous experience, that the main concern in this case was to assess the prisoner's fitness for work. When I had completed my "evaluation" the officer asked whether I had come to a conclusion as to the prisoner's competence for work. I had now therefore to be both diplomatic and precise, and my response was that the examined prisoner was fit, to the best of my knowledge, for light work for the next two weeks and thereafter should be re-examined. My medical examination indicated that the prisoner was recovering from a feverish illness and was at present convalescent. I was then asked whether the prisoner had been able to do some work in the past two weeks, to which I replied that I had not done any clinical tests such as a blood test, urine test, chest X-ray, so I was not in a position to pass any judgement on the last interrogation. I was required to examine the man, which I had done, and I had put in writing my report of whatever I had found on physical examination. However, if he wished me to put some questions to the prisoner, I would do so. The officer's terse response was that this was unnecessary. He would study the report and if there were any further queries to be answered I would be summoned again.

A week later one of the guards, Andrei, who always tried to be kind and more humane, told me that the prisoner whom I had examined had been court marshalled and shot for refusing to work. At that time "otkazchik" was the Russian expression for a prisoner who refused to work. I never found out the truth about what had happened in this case.

Elena, the nurse, when she was on duty in August assisted me on the rounds taking all the messages with the greatest care. She was a teacher by profession and during one of the evening meetings of teachers in Moscow, which looked like an innocuous gathering, some had complained of unsatisfactory payments for their work. That night, the KGB carried out a raid, and arrested all the speakers. They were later prosecuted and sent to corrective labour camps. Elena herself had been one of the speakers. She was about 35 years of age, had a family in Moscow and was very concerned about their safety. Although always depressed by her fears, she had proved to be a most conscientious worker.

There were no special restrictions for the medical staff. I could shave myself daily. My room was kept clean for me and I could change my shirt almost every day. Each afternoon we were counted in the wards just to make sure that we were all alive and no-one had fancied taking the risk of escaping. On rare occasions Andrei, the guard, whose parents were

of Polish extraction, used to give me secretly some old Russian newspapers so that I had some idea of the news.

On one occasion a KGB officer who had known me well gave me some information about Cracow saying, "Dr. Geller, I have some very good news for you, which was practically confirmed by our broadcasts. Cracow is under German occupation but will soon be liberated by the Russians".

The majority of patients in the wards suffered from diarrhoea which contained mucous mixed with blood. Some of these cases were caused by pellagra. Dr. Yakovlenko himself, the senior officer, and the chief medical officer of the hospital, as well as other high ranking officers and also prisoners who were in charge of the administration, came under my care as a result of the above condition. I tried among other remedies charcoal and bismuth. Our pharmacist was very resourceful and prepared charcoal for our use from the dwarf birches growing in the taiga. Non-pellagra diarrhoea responded to the above two remedies but the diarrhoea due to pellagra was resistant to treatment. Proper nutrition was the only effective one. I myself developed an attack of "haemocolit" but simply had to endure it and carry on with my normal work in spite of the difficulty.

On 30th August, 1941, just when I was about to get up, there was an unexpected knock on the door. When I opened it, the messenger gave me the news with great excitement, that all the Poles were to be set free. In this camp situated so far in the North behind the Pechora River it sounded more like a dream, totally divorced from reality. I was one of the first in the hospital to whom this historic message was delivered. I was called to the KGB office in the hospital where the officer in charge proclaimed my freedom in a ceremonial way. He suggested that I remain in Russia as a free doctor and would be offered a good position due to my experience and speaking fluent Russian. I could settle down to start a new life. The officer warned me that North Russia was the safest place at that time as the actual war had just started between Russia and her allies against the Nazis. I expressed my thanks to him and explained my present situation; that my parents were in Yoshkar Ola and my duty was to find them; that I would look for a job in a hospital to be near enough to help. The officer shook hands with me and wished me every success.

I rushed to the convalescent hospital accompanied by a guard to share this momentous development with my colleagues. I was given a hero's welcome by the Poles and both doctors declared that they were immediately going to prepare a list of Poles fit for discharge and the long

journey which was then to be expected. I returned to the hospital where I met Dr. Yakovlenko and besides him the Assistant Director of Medical Services who expressed the wish to accompany me on my rounds. Their presence was justified if only to check whether I was going to release the right patients for a rather long and complicated journey by train, commercial trucks, on foot and by boat. In any case I would not have risked removing sick and debilitated Poles thus involving them in the extra risk of travelling in an unfavourable environment.

It was a day of mixed feelings, a day of joy and sadness as I had to leave behind my patients, countrymen who were not in good enough shape to be able to venture on such a strenuous undertaking. A compassionate security officer warned me again that I should think it over before going away, as the war was at present at its worst and I would be safer remaining where I was. In a carefully controlled voice I replied that I had no intention of quitting Russia but that I had a moral obligation towards my parents who were now in Russia. I then had to say goodbye to all the doctors, nurses, felchers, and medical auxiliaries with whom I had established a cordial friendship over the months of working closely together. The majority of the staff and patients tried to conceal their feelings but Natalya, whom I thanked warmly for her kindness and friendship, was unable to control her tears. She embraced me like a mother and ran into the hospital, and Misha, the baker, and Sergei, the nurse, called once more in Russian "all the very best". We were directed to the nearby convalescent hospitals escorted by a guard, then every Pole whose name was read out had to go behind the fence where he was searched by the security officer. When it came to my turn, the KGB officer wanted to take away a woollen blanket which had been given to me by Sergei. The clerk in charge of labour distribution, Steypan, raised his voice and said to the KGB officer abusively, "Aren't you ashamed to be searching our doctor?". As a result of Steypan's intervention the security officer left the blanket alone.

We, the liberated prisoners, escorted by a few guards, then marched to a very small station. Suddenly an order was issued by the guards that we should return to the hospital as bad weather was forecast. I was pleased to a certain extent as my diarrhoea still persisted and I was glad to have another day's rest in the hospital and continue my treatment with bismuth and charcoal. The next morning the same routine proceedings were followed and I had to go through another emotional ceremony and say goodbye once more to all the doctors. It was especially painful to part from Natalya again, since it was obviously a great mental strain and effort for her. This time we arrived safely at the tiny station in the taiga still in Komi. We were packed into heavy goods trucks and after a short trip of

about a couple of hours we reached Kaninosa, the transit camp where I had worked in May 1941 and which I remembered so well. I recognised it at once as the same guard who used to call out the prisoners' names from the records with all the details and the appropriate sentences was still on the gate. My two wooden trunks which had been left during my transfer by foot to the northern hospital I found intact and waiting for me to collect. The atmosphere at Kaninosa was very like being in a beehive, and I had the pleasure of encountering again a number of my friends, among others, Dr. M. Cichy, Dr. Ptaszynski and Dr. Martin Shenberg. They were in good health. I was glad also to see Elek Bucheister from Cracow, whose sister Mrs. G. Mark was a close friend of my wife. He used to call to my room in the hospital in the first camp, requesting me amongst other things to keep under my care food parcels received from his family, as it was not safe to keep them in the barrack. We talked about a brighter future and meeting again in Cracow. Elek's health was satisfactory and I assumed that he was going to join the Polish Forces.

On 10th September, 1941, we were at last presented with the official documents of acquittal confirming our release. At the same time every person set free was given on discharge a fixed gratuity so that one could buy provisions in the camp shop for a long journey, including bread, sugar, tinned food and maxorka (Russian tobacco). From Kaninosa camp we walked through woodland to the Pechora River where hundreds and hundreds of Poles were arriving from various places, all of whom had to be directed to a transit camp where the official documents of freedom had to be handed out. We waited our turn and eventually the motor boat appeared, pulled up and took us a further stage on our journey. Seagulls flew overhead as though bidding us farewell. The sky was almost sea green and the roar of the waves embodying the elemental power of nature was for us so overwhelming that our experiences of deprivation and humiliation in an upsurge of joy were all forgotten, for a few seconds at least. The crossing of the Pechora took an hour, after which we stepped ashore where our documents had again to be verified. Our final objective was to reach Tockoye where the Polish army in Russia had to be created, organised and subsequently quit Russia to join the Allied Forces.

## UPON LIBERATION JOINED THE POLISH FORCES VISIT TO MY PARENTS AND DEPARTURE FROM RUSSIA

## CHAPTER 3

I reached Tockoye, the assembly headquarters of the Polish Forces on 23rd September, 1941, where I quickly adjusted to the new camp environment. I realised that the war between the U.S.A., the U.K. and the Russians, now fighting as allies against Germany was gradually expanding. The first night I spent in a stable without walls. Some of the early arrivals had been fortunate enough to manage to find a berth for themselves in the mangers, but I and a few of my friends had no alternative but to attempt to sleep on the ground. We lay down and actually fell asleep quickly, but unfortunately the silence of the night was soon interrupted by the crashing fall of the crowded racks of the mangers. As our luggage, and not our heads. lay under the mangers, by a stroke of sheer luck we escaped injury. It was a rather cool evening, and since our first sleep had been so rudely disturbed, we lit a small fire outside our "headquarters", as we found plenty of broken pieces of boards round the place. Apart from this disturbance the rest of the night was quiet and I had a little nap sitting beside the fire.

Within three days I was allocated to the medical unit in Tockoye, I soon found that conditions were hardly better, and in some aspects worse, than in the camps I had left. In the barracks, the officers slept on planks and the NCOs on the bare floor. I had scouted around and found some wooden boards nearby, guarded by a soldier. Obviously great care would be needed to steal the treasure, so I organised a night raid with some colleagues. We had to crawl to where the soldier sat dozing by the fire, carefully extract the precious boards, and steal away. Other excursions also proved fruitful, resulting in a measure of relief at night for all of us.

It was cheering to find among those awaiting transit a number of medical colleagues from past camps and even from Cracow. And yet the fact of being at Tockoye, en route to freedom, was something of an anti-climax. I lay awake at night worrying about my family, and making myself ill enough to have to report to the Army Clinic, where I was seen by a dermatologist. The condition cleared up on its own, and was probably psychosomatic. Until the news of our release, the imagining of that event and the idealised vision of a grand family reunion had kept my spirits buoyant for the most part. Now that joyous occasion seemed as far off as ever. I was in a state of limbo, living in a kind of emotional tundra.

As always in life, and especially in captivity, periods of low morale alternated with times of spiritual upliftment. The Eve of the Day of Atonement was one such. An orthodox Jewish soldier from Tarnov in Poland conducted the service in Hebrew, giving to the opening Kol Nidrei a depth of feeling that moved the assembly to tears of relief after the deprivations they had endured. It was an evening to cherish all one's life, and its setting in a bleak barrack without doors or windows seemed only to emphasise our need for divine guidance at this time.

Meanwhile there were things to occupy our time. I was assigned to the Conscription Board with two colleagues, our task being to examine all the new conscripts from various Russian camps to determine their fitness for military service. We ourselves were eligible, and were obliged to undergo training. This involved morning drill and weapon training by professional instructors. I viewed it with apprehension, but at least it was better than having time on one's hands for brooding.

On completion of the programme, I was given three stripes and assigned to a battalion as their doctor. By now, it was winter, and I found myself under canvass with the troops. We shared the tasks of keeping the tent tidy and collecting wood daily for the fire. At Christmas, the Commanding Officer invited me for dinner to his tent, where we spent an enjoyable few hours breaking the traditional thin wafers and exchanging wishes for the safe return to our loved ones.

Food supplies and other items were in perpetual short supply, necessitating forays into a market town, about 18–20 kms. from camp via the local railway, where we bought or bartered some of the things we needed. In Tockoye itself was a universal store ("univermag"), where books in Russian were available at a very low price. The shop was simply loaded with them. When I called in one day looking for an unusually large book the girl assistant, who had attended me several times before, said how impressed she was with Polish culture and how intelligent the Polish soldiers must be, as they so regularly came in to buy Russian books. I thanked her for her charming compliments and did not care to tell her the truth – that no toilet paper was available in the camp and the Russian books were eagerly pressed into service.

Time began to hang heavily. I needed news of my people. Then, through the good offices of Lt. Colonel Dr. Adam Soltysik, I obtained leave to visit my parents who had been deported from Poland to Russia and who now lived in Gomzowo, a small village about 6–7 km. from the town of Yoshkar Ola, in the Marijskaya Republic. They had given permission after the amnesty to live in a place of their own choosing.

On the day of departure, I struggled with my two wooden trunks to the railway station some 4 kms. distant. But this was to be a long and tedious journey, complicated by many changes of train, the unpredictability of the skeleton service through shortage of rolling stock, and that infamous Russian winter despaired of by Napoleon. I was fortunate to be provided with a huge loaf of bread, baked specially for me by a fellow prisoner I first met in Odessa and who now ran the Tockoye camp bakery. This and the warmed drinking water picked up at wayside stations had to sustain me through the several days travelling it took to reach Kuybyshev, where I got out to face an indeterminate wait for a different train.

The situation looked hopeless. Hundreds of people were trying to sleep on the stone floors of the station, not knowing when a train might be due, or whether they could get on it when it did arrive. I spoke to a depressed looking Pole, Jan Domanski, declared unfit for active military service on account of a bad limp, who begged me for help. Almost in despair, I found a Polish Embassy in the town, where I met Professor Kot. I asked him if he could find accommodation for Domanski and myself. He could offer nothing. I made other enquiries, finally being referred to a Polish General Berling, who was in the town. He suggested that I go to a Russian hostel near the station where I should find a bed and be able to remain until my departure for Yoshkar Ola. He also advised me to attend the Russian military shop for my daily ration, where on producing my leave and army papers, I would be able to obtain what was due to me. This I received regularly, without any difficulty and also without payment. I shared the rations with Domanski. General Berling assured me that, as far as he was aware, there would be a train to Kazan, on the way to Yoshkar Ola, in 8 days' time. He warned me I would have to fight to get on the train as hundreds of people were waiting for it. If, however, I missed it, my chances of getting another train in time to reach my parents were very slim.

One day while queueing up in the station to get into the restaurant for some hot soup, a Russian guard, who noticed me dressed in a long military overcoat, took me out of the queue and led me into the restaurant, thus saving me further waiting. Although I had about 100 roubles with me, I had to be careful not to spend too much since the immediate future was so uncertain. Luckily on the exact date given by the General the train arrived at about midnight. Boarding it proved to be an unforgettable battle, like an episode from Dante's Inferno, but both Domanski and I eventually succeeded in getting on. We were squeezed into the Pullman compartment and were lucky enough to get one seat which we took turns to occupy. The remaining passengers were Russians and were most friendly towards us. We arrived after some

three or four days at a small station called Rozayewka, and there I had to change and wait for another train.

During the first few days no-one was able to give me any information about when this train would arrive. Luckily in the station waiting room I met a most pleasant Russian couple about 50 years' old with their young daughter. They asked me to accept them as relatives so that they would be able to get on the train as a soldier's family, and in gratitude they would provide me with food. I could see that they had with them two cans of pickled cucumbers and tomatoes, also some meat and ham. In the meantime, I found out from the station master that a Pullman was expected within a few days, in the afternoon. I enjoyed the company of my newly adopted relatives, Igor and Irina, and their daughter. They were most attractive and intelligent people and their help meant that I would no longer starve. But poor Domanski, from over-indulgence in pickled cucumber, developed diarrhoea and stomach ache!

As soon as the promised train arrived in the early afternoon. I forced my way in and occupied one compartment but, while fighting to get on to it, a petty thief snatched the belt from my overcoat, and I missed this very much. The train, however, did not go straight to Kazan and I was told that I would have to change yet again before Kazan to Yoshkar Ola. It was already dark when we arrived at our second stop, a small village where the station master told me to stay for the night and promised, as there were no more trains expected, that I would be able to continue my journey the next morning. He recommended a place where we could sleep on the floor, somewhere in the village about 2 km. from the station, and so I left my luggage in his office and we went to look for the place. We finally found it as he had said, and an elderly Russian lady living alone brought us some straw so that we could sleep on the floor. Next morning we got up early and had a cup of tea. I paid a few roubles for the night's stay and we rushed to the station. At first the conductress would not let me on as I did not have a reserved seat. However when I offered her a few tablets of Aspirin and some cigarettes, permission was granted. It was still winter and the roads were covered in thick and heavy snow, but inside the train it was really warm as it was absolutely packed. About midday I arrived in Yoshkar Ola, on about the 8th or 9th February, 1942.

I went to the town Major, introduced myself in Russian, and upon producing my army papers was provided with sledges and a soldier to guide us to our destination. It took us about 40 minutes to reach the village where my family was living, and at last the moment I had lived for during all those interminable months was upon me. The joy of my

It was an offence to drink alcohol, but some prisoners occasionally managed to aquire it from outside. There were no signs of inebriation in this case, though I could smell vodka when the prisoner breathed into a wet glass, the simplest method applied for detecting alcohol. I gave my opinion to the officer and found out later that the prisoner was punished with forty-eight hours in a dark isolation ward on bread and water.

I became friendly in the camp with a Russian prisoner aged 33 whose name was Grigori. He was the officer responsible for the water tower. One day he showed me a letter from his wife in which she told him that she had made the acquaintance of a man who wanted to be her husband and a father to their 8-year old daughter. She thought she ought to marry him and was sure he would understand her position. Five years was a long time for a young wife to wait for a prisoner husband. Grigori accepted it, having no choice, convinced that on his release from the camp his wife would change her mind and come back to him. Poor Grigori.

Some evenings the night guard would knock on my door, ostensibly to find out how I was, but more probably to establish whether there was a gathering of my countrymen or if I was transmitting messages to the outside world! There was another Geller in the camp, a relative of mine. He was a pleasant young fellow, employed as a hairdresser. I advised him not to call to my room in the hospital in the evenings, as I did not want to be involved with the KGB.

One evening in January 1941, three Russian prisoners were admitted to the hospital. They came from a harsh disciplinary camp for prisoners who refused to work, where they were kept on a low calorie diet. According to the medical report they were found in the snow in a semi-comatose condition. I was on duty in the hospital and Mr. Chernishev, who was really marvellous in his concern for my welfare, arrived to find out whether I could cope. He was also worrying about my general health, and gave me some guidance about the treatment of pellagra cases, having wide knowledge and experience in nutritional deficiencies. In his approach to prisoners (whom he treated as human beings) his behaviour was a mixture of wisdom and benevolence. As I was so keen to do everything possible to keep these pellagra cases alive, he suggested that I try among other remedies an adrenalin injection into the left ventricle but to do it slowly, warning me at the same time to carry out that therapy in the presence of the duty nurse and not to be disappointed if by the morning all three were dead. From his own experience and observations of advanced cases of pellagra, recovery seldom occurred. By the morning two patients were dead, but the third survived although

he was confused and showed signs of dementia. However he remained alive, his condition gradually improved, and eventually he was transferred to a central hospital.

In the past few weeks, I had seen quite a number of fresh cases of scurvy, pellagra and patients with oedematous (unnaturally swollen) legs secondary to malnutrition caused by a low protein intake.

The advanced pellagra patients displayed mental fatigue, apprehension, depression, inability to concentrate, loss of memory, diarrhoea with prolonged bleeding, and in the more advanced stages disorientation, confusion and dementia. Clinically, there were characteristic skin lesions on the parts of the body exposed to sunlight, which were separated from the healthy skin by a distinct border. The lesions, however, varied, and in the initial phase they were red, thereafter changing to a reddish brown pigmentation. When the patient deteriorated, these were replaced by a precise brown colouration. Some of them developed fissures in the pigmented skin. The Russian doctors in the camp summed up the pellagra picture as mnemonic "5D", Dermatitis, Diarrhoea, Dementia, Dysfunction of the endocrine glands, and Depression. Pellagra sufferers were given large doses of nicotinic acid by oral and intravenous routes. There were also recorded a few cases of peripheral neuritis.

During the morning surgery I had to see a young Russian prisoner, named Yakovlenko, who was then 17. He complained of general fatigue and headache. Just before starting my examination I noticed his slightly swollen face and oedema of both his legs. His B.P. was raised and his urine showed proteinuria. I handed him a letter for admission to my ward, making a tentative diagnosis of pre-uraemia. About 15 minutes later Yosef the felcher from the other consulting room, rushed into my surgery and asked me whether I knew that Yakovlenko had been discharged as fit the day before from the wards of the Russian lady doctor, Termoserebian. Yosef warned me to be prepared for the most unpleasant repercussions as a result of my diagnosis. At 9 a.m. I was called from the hospital to Dr. Avchennikova's office where she upbraided me in very strong terms.

"Geller," she began, "are you out of your mind? Must you always be reminded that you are a prisoner? Once again by your actions you have shown disloyalty to a respected and experienced free lady doctor."

I tried to justify myself. "I was completely unaware that Yakovlenko had been discharged as fit only yesterday. He was certainly in poor

health when I saw him this morning. It is my responsibility to make an objective diagnosis of every patient I see."

She stared at me stonily, saying nothing. The seconds ticked by like the passing of hours. I was convinced she had some unpleasant punishment in mind. At last it came to me that anger in the face of callous injustice does nothing but raise the adrenalin level in one's system. The situation called for a more subtle response, and what befits the slave better than the mask of humility?

"Perhaps I was mistaken in admitting the boy to hospital," I said. "It is always possible to make human errors."

Still she said nothing, and so having said all I needed to, I left her office.

About two hours later, Yakovlenko developed convulsions, and with my diagnosis of uraemia he was admitted to an outside central hospital. Dr. Avchennikova softened after this episode and I had the impression that she respected me more during the rest of my stay in the camp. But this was not the end of the story.

About a week later after the Yakovlenko's case of uraemia, Dr. Termoserebian's animosity towards me burst into the open. She called at my wards and started checking my patients one by one, making remarks that one third of them were in good health and should be discharged. When she finished her rounds with me she stopped me in the corridor and ordered me to do a post-mortem on one of the prisoners who had died in her wards. She said smiling, "You will have to do a post-mortem in your room, as we have nowhere else available. Don't worry. The room will be washed clean and painted, and you will be able to sleep in there again next day. After all, you are a prisoner and you have to get used to it. For the night after the post-mortem we shall accommodate you in the office room."

I could hardly manage to sleep in my room for the next ten nights.

By the end of February 1941 I already spoke fluent Russian and thought my position was now strong enough to begin to fight for my prisoner's rights. I did not want to upset Chernishev and so did not consult him about my decision. I made an appointment to see Dr. Avchennikova, who was surprised to see me. I trusted her more in the aftermath of the Yakovlenko affair, and felt that she would not do me any real harm. My request was to be relieved from the morning Surgeries. I

was sure that there was no replacement for me and also that the security officers would not give their consent to sending me away for general labour. I told her about my long hours of work and said that I did not have enough time for study, resting and sleep. However, if she thought it was impossible to take me off the morning surgery duties, I would not mind being transferred for general work.

Dr. Avchennikova smiled and said that she had to give me a general check-up in order to assess my fitness for general work. I assured her that I was in good physical condition but she insisted on an examination. I had to strip off my shirt while she examined me and entered the findings in my records; probably my grade and physical fitness which was in every prisoner's record. Thereafter with a friendly smile she announced her verdict on the spot – that as from the next morning I was discharged from taking morning surgeries, which would alleviate my mental and physical condition. As a result I was able to devote more time to the wards and also to the evening surgeries. I came across more and more new cases of scurvy both in the surgery and the wards. I prescribed copiously rosehip tablets, which, as I have said earlier, was the only vitamin C which was available.

Sexual problems were dealt with fairly strictly. Relations between prisoners were forbidden and also between prisoners and partners having a free status. If sexual relations were proved after investigation, both partners were answerable for the "offence". The punishment consisted of moving the persons involved, separately, to an isolation ward for several days on bread and water. One of my nurses in the camp, a prisoner called Ksenia, was involved with a Russian prisoner, a photographer, and spent one or two nights with him. When it came to light, an order was given by the authorities to punish both offenders. Ksenia called at the surgery begging me for a certificate to the effect that she was unwell, so that she would escape from the disciplinary punishment which would be imposed on her. She blamed me for the affair as I had declined to make love with her, so I was faced with Hobson's choice and was forced to help her with a certificate, which was accepted. I cautioned her at the same time that it would be impossible for me to provide similar certificates in the future as this would be against both the rules and my principles.

In the meantime a mass vaccination programme against typhoid and paratyphoid was started in the camp and injections were given by a Russian lady doctor assisted by a felcher. As it happened, one of the Russian prisoners from my wards developed an anaphylactic shock within minutes of the injection. I was requested urgently by the matron to

see him and I asked her on the telephone to prepare an adrenalin injection. Unfortunately, on arrival I found him dead. I prepared a medical report on the deceased and his past history, and concluded that the cause of death was anaphylaxis* following an acute reaction to the typhoid and paratyphoid vaccination. I was ordered to appear in the hospital a few hours later by a high ranking medical officer, Dr. Aleksei Aleksandrovich, dressed in military uniform, who wished to see me urgently. As soon as I arrived he requested me to read my medical report, which I did. I was ordered to tear it up and prepare a new one as the cause of death in his opinion was malaria, and he delivered a short talk on this disease, which according to him was unknown to me. To take it more persuasive he assured me that the dead man came from the southern part of Russia where malaria was endemic. He did not blame me for my error as I had probably never seen malaria in Poland. The officer made it clear that this was an order, and I understood that our meeting had to remain confidential. I assured him I would prepare a fresh medical history and, on parting, he was very friendly as I had not disputed his authority.

I was mistaken in thinking that this was the end of the matter. The next morning I was summoned to the security office to face three high ranking officers – I daresay all possessing a wide knowledge of medicine.

"Who made you write this medical report?" demanded one of the officers, handing the report to me. I was taken aback. Nobody else had been present during my encounter with Dr. Aleksandrovich.

"The report was written of my own free will and to the best of my knowledge," I replied.

"Indeed. Why don't you say straight out that someone in the medical profession preferred it to be known that the cause of death was malaria rather than an anaphylactic shock?"

"The answer I have given to the first question covers the second also."

"Very well. Now perhaps you will tell us who made you tear up your original medical report."

This was a tricky one. It would have been easy to implicate Dr. Aleksandrovich, who no doubt would have denied it in such a way as to cause more trouble for me. I made a non-committal reply. "I have not discussed the case with any doctor."

*Anaphylaxis = an unpredictable and most severe hypersensitive reaction to any serum or any other injection (i.e. penicillin). It can be rapidly fatal and is characterised by flushing, urticaria, angiooedema, bronchospasm and cardio-respiratory arrest.

The questioner nodded, as though understanding what was behind my answer. "And have you ever, in your medical practice, come across an anaphylactic death?"

"Certainly. I remember in . . . ."
"You are required to answer 'yes' or 'no'," the security officer interrupted. "Lectures are not required."
"The answer is yes."

Shortly after this I was dismissed to return to my work. I had a curious feeling that the whole incident, so avowedly confidential, had somehow been accurately charted by the security people.

At the beginning of March I suffered further degradation from Dr. Termoserebian, who made me perform a second post-mortem in the room where I had my meals, where I slept, rested and studied. My private life was thoroughly upset, and the sickly smell of dead flesh hung about for days. I was almost in despair, and fearing that I might be submitted to further humiliation, I decided that the only solution was to apply to the security officer for transfer to another camp. Mr. Chernishev, the free senior felcher, warned me against doing anything precipitate. His interpretation of the situation was that since the Yakovlenko affair, Dr. Termoserebian had lost her popularity, while my own medical work was very much respected and appreciated by the officers, clerks and by Dr. Avchennikova herself. He finally persuaded me to ignore the incident and to continue with my work as usual. His trust in me was very evident,as on several occasions he had asked me to see the private patients whom he brought to the camp from where he was living. He just wanted to have my opinion and I understood that it had to be kept secret.

Suddenly, I had news from my family that they had been deported and were in exile in Russia. I decided to make an application for a transfer as a means of allowing me to spend the remainder of my sentence with my family in exile, and knowing one Russian lawyer, a prisoner, I asked him to prepare two such applications for me. One I posted through the normal channel and the other I intended to send by an outsider, as I was not sure whether the first one would get through the Russian censorship. I had never asked any Russian officer for favours, but this time I made up my mind and approached one of the officers who was a patient of mine. I explained that I had already posted one application from the camp and would be obliged if he would be willing to send a copy of it from outside to my family. I found out later that my parents received a letter from Kalinin (Home Office) who rejected the request, but I received no answer myself. Probably the application was stopped by the camp censorship.

There was one category of patients who, whatever you did, such as keeping them in the hospitals, sometimes for several weeks, for minor ailments, still demanded more and more privileges. On the other hand, patients of a low social class, in whatever way you helped them, were always grateful, happy and appreciative. I remember on my first two days in the camp when one of the good hearted professional criminals with whom I had spent a few days in the same cell in the Polish prison, and thereafter some months in Odessa, ran after me in the camp and forced me to take a loan from him to buy myself some food from the camp shop, as he thought I looked pale and exhausted. As I hesitated to accept his offer he insisted saying: "You will have to be strong and in good health. You'll be our doctor and we shall need you." I went to the shop and purchased some bread and jam. There were in the camp some so-called intellectuals who had plenty of money, but they never suggested giving any help when it was needed. How glad I felt when I was established as the camp doctor and thus was able to help those most in need whenever possible. As soon as I received my first salary I went to the "gentlemanly criminal" to repay the loan. "You remember" he said to me "in Poland there was a custom to pay by instalments. It must be applied here as well."

One morning during my rounds in the wards, Natasha, the matron, noticed that I was scratching myself frequently. She was a pretty young blonde Russian nurse and most helpful in the work. We often discussed medical problems and I found her very cooperative. She was dedicated to her work and treated all the patients in the same way, making no distinction between Russians or Poles. Natasha was proud of my work, and if any official arrived for an inspection of the hospital barracks, and there were several, my wards were always visited, and the official subsequently expressed satisfaction to the matron and to me for the standards we had achieved. We discussed after our rounds how best to help the debilitated patients, and usually found ourselves in agreement.

The discharge of patients from the hospital wards was in the majority of cases my province. From time to time she asked about my life in Poland. Could I afford to go to the theatre once or twice monthly, or to the cinema or a nightclub for dancing? Yes, I enjoyed these activities and the social life with my university colleagues. There were few luxuries, but my income allowed me to have a satisfying life. While on this subject, she touched rather gently on one occasion on my political interests; whether I belonged to any political organisation, for instance. I had to tell her that I had neither the leisure not the interest for such matters.

It was after one of our afternoon rounds that Natasha asked me to

accompany her to the office. She felt embarrassed at suggesting that I might have picked up lice, and asked me to take off my shirt to see what was causing the itching. As I hesitated, she smiled. "Let's make a little bet. If I find any lice I'll give you a kiss for every one."

The idea was most attractive. "If I'd known you had that in mind, I'd have prepared a few. It's too late now."

She soon saw the evidence of scurvy with the accompanying multiple petechial lesions on the skin.

"How could you have let this develop without confiding in me?" she asked, obviously hurt.

"I didn't think it was serious enough to bother you with. We treat it among the prisoners all the time."

"But you should not count yourself among them. You are our doctor, and working much too hard." Her concern for me made her even prettier, with her lovely blond hair and regular features. I was touched by it all.

The next morning I began with a breakfast rich in Vitamin C, consisting of cucumber, carrots, tomatoes and onions, from the camp stores. After 14 days the petecchiae* had disappeared, the itching gone, and I felt much better.

Working with Natasha was one of the few pleasures in the camp routine. In the early days of March 1941, well noted in my diary, she asked me to have tea with her. We settled down in her office, discussing the medical condition of our patients, when out of the blue she said. "Would you marry me?"

I stammered out some non-committal reply while giggled at my embarrassment. "You've only a short sentence," she teased, "I'm sure I could wait that long. They might even set you free earlier."

In the same spirit I replied "If I don't have news from my girl friend by May, I might just take you up on it."

"Ah, but the winter months in Russia, Dr. Geller, are very long. If we wait until May they'll seem longer still."

There was no simple answer to this, so I changed the subject as diplomatically as I could.

Good though our relationship was, I suspected that Natasha probably had a secret Communist Party affiliation. I had positive evidence that the Russian prisoners forming the auxiliary medical staff were reporting to the KGB all after-hours visits to me by prisoners, who were mostly Poles.

*Marked pink spots under the skin or under mucosal membranes caused by fragile capillary bleeding.

But Natasha's behaviour towards me was friendly and open throughout my stay at Krasnyj Paxar.

Rumours began to spread that something had gone wrong with the Russo-German alliance, and that war was imminent. Of more direct consequence to us, we learned that our camp was to be wound down, and we would be transferred to the northern part of Russia. The prospect was far from attractive. Nonetheless it gave us all another talking point.

On returning from my last round in the hospital, I met Dr. Termoserebian. "Goodbye, Dr. Geller. You must be glad to be leaving this camp, and me especially."

"I bear no ill feeling." I replied.
She looked at me in a curious calculating way. "What a strange man you are."

When I returned to my room I found everything upside down. Before meeting me she had ransacked my room, accompanied by a nurse, and gone through my few possessions. If ever I had cause to hate anyone, it was her.

Then came the friendly parting from the nurses I had worked with, and a warm, last kiss from Natasha, whom I knew I should miss, as she wished me a pleasant journey and good health. We were loaded into cattle trucks, forty or fifty of us to each, and so commenced our journey to the bitter climate of Northern Russia.

As with everything in life, there was a brighter side, at least for a short time. My friendly Mr. Chernishev who had ensured my smooth induction into the camp medical routines was appointed Chief Medical Officer to our convoy.

We did not know what awaited us, but could not escape the dreary rations of bread, warm tea, and the all-pervading stink from the large container provided for releaving ourselves. As on an earlier journey, the drinking water had to be used for washing our hands, and there was never enough. At certain stations, the Chief Medical Officer inspected the wagons, but it was not until the fourth dreary day that he came to us to ask about the health of myself and the others. I complained of the disgusting lack of hygiene, and he looked at me closely. Two hours later at another station the transport officer called me to bring out my wooden trunks and all my belongings. I was led to a wagon with two clean beds, in one of which lay a patient, a Russian prisoner. I was instructed by Chernishev in the presence of the guard to look after him and report if his

condition deteriorated by knocking on the door. I could see that there was nothing particularly wrong with Andrei, the patient, and it was obvious that Chernishev wanted to give me a chance to have a rest in a more hygienic environment. A few hours before reaching our destination, when stopping at yet another station, the guard called me take to my luggage and I had to return to my original wagon Number 26. On arrival I could not find adequate words to thank Chernishev for his great kindness and care. He inspired me with fresh courage and wished me good health, before saying farewell.

We arrived in Kaninosa about the 8th or 9th May 1941, where we found the weather still grey and wintry. I had a bag of rusks, prepared by the Russian nurses for my journey, and since my fellow Poles in the wagon were hungry, I distributed it amongst them, telling them that today was my wife's birthday and that we should celebrate it. We found that we had been sent to a large transit camp already packed with inmates. A few hours after my arrival, while having a shower, a middle aged Russian lady entered. I felt embarrassed but she said "nichevo", which meant "there is nothing to worry about." I dressed quickly and was then called to the office, already knowing that the lady who had come into the shower room unannounced was indeed the Chief Medical Officer of the camp.

Her name was Dr. Sharbe Tamara Aleksandra, a rather brisk and masculine type and herself a prisoner. After checking my records from the previous camp she assumed that I must have enough experience by now as a prison doctor. She explained that I would be assigned with another colleague, a Russian doctor, to examine prisoners and classify them according to their capability for work. I asked Dr Sharbe to employ a Polish dentist, Mr. M. Rosenthal, who was then living in one of the general barracks, and who had also been with me before in the first camp, but she refused to employ him. I was allocated a pleasant single room in the officers' building where I could rest before commencing my newly assigned task the next morning. Kaninosa was an enormous transit camp into which prisoners of different nationalities from various prisons or labour camps were pouring in hundreds and thousands daily and they all had to be examined. The camp was actually inundated with these prisoners, and the necessity for assessing their fitness for work was now urgent in order to make way for newcomers.

The examination had to be extremely quick and very superficial, but this was the procedure imposed by Dr. Sharbe and carried out under her aegis. Prisoners in groups of eighty of more were inspected by a quick scan of their general appearance to make sure that they had both upper

and lower limbs. Special attention was paid to the structure of the gluteal muscles and the size of the gap between the buttocks, as this factor, a consequence of starvation was accepted as an indicator of the prisoners' general and nutritional condition. The further apart the buttocks, and the more conspicuous and wide the distance between them, the more advanced was the individual's nutritional deficiency and the consequent wasting of their muscles. If during screening a discolouration of the peripheral part of the body or significant oedema of the lower limbs was noticed, or if the person complained of dyspnoea, ausculation* of the chest was carried out. An appropriate grade of fitness for work was registered in each prisoner's dossier before transferral to another camp. The average number of prisoners screened by one doctor in that way within 2 hours could reach 200 or more. There was no real time under the circumstances for any thorough individual assessment.

Among the groups of Polish doctors I met there I should mention particularly an eminent middle aged surgeon, Dr. Adam Soltysik. He met everything that happened, however difficult or startling, with great dignity and calm. His behaviour inspired the younger (junior) doctors and he was most friendly and helpful to us all.

The constant stream of prisoners were somehow accommodated in the already overcrowded barracks with bunks and each was provided daily with 400g of bread and some soup. Groups of hundreds of selected prisoners were transferred regularly to various camps, the majority on foot with their dossiers guarded by armed escorts. On some days two or three convoys of prisoners were leaving Kaninosa camp to make room for the new arrivals.

I realised that my appointment in the present camp was temporary and I had no idea where I would be moved to after completion of my work.

I performed my allotted daily examinations and waited patiently for the day when my task would be completed. On some days I encountered in the crowd of prisoners a number of acquaintances from my native city, but I tried for security reasons not to become involved in any close communication with them but rather to convey silently, by way of an ostentatious wink, that they had been recognised and that I would give them every possible assistance. One day, while carrying out my medical task, I had the chance of introducing the dentist Mr. Rosenthal, to Dr. Sharbe. She took an instant liking to him and promised to find a suitable occupation for him, reversing her previous decision. Two days later she

*Act of listening to movements of the lungs, heart etc.

Please correct printing error: auscultation.

ordered me to move from my room to the general barracks for clerks, and shortly afterwards Mr. Rosenthal told me that he had taken it over and felt very distressed about it. Dr. Sharbe apparently expected some sexual service from him in return for the various favours she offered. The dentist was not very responsive to her advances as she was not an attractive female, but had to put up with the situation. Moreover, Mr. Rosenthal found that the light nights in the North impaired his libido. Even so, Dr. Sharbe looked after him well, providing whatever little luxuries were available, such as chocolates, cigarettes and so on.

In the meantime a very important visitor, the assistant director of medical services, arrived at the camp. It was a Dr. Aleksandra, who was not a prisoner. Her responsibility was to interview the doctors, discover their specialities, ascertain the state of their health and their knowledge of Russian, and thereafter assign them to different hospitals or camps in the North. Fizula, the auxiliary attendant, told me all the doctors except myself had been seen by Dr. Aleksandra and that now it was my turn. He advised me to be relaxed during the interview with Dr. Aleksandra as she was responsible for deciding the location of every doctor. I was pleased to find her both young and good-looking, and her attitude towards me most encouraging. She began by asking whether I would mind if she enquired about some personal details, as the medical facts were by now known to her from my dossier. Was I alright for money, cigarettes, shirts and so on? Had I perhaps left a girlfriend in Poland. She complimented me on my fluent Russian and then put a further question. Would I like to participate with her in a medical assignment provided she undertook the administration and I the medical work? Receiving my answer, she actually shook hands with me, which had never happened to me before as a prisoner. She promised to instruct Dr. Sharbe to make use of my services for another 7 to 10 days and that subsequently I would be transferred to the hospital where she would be working.

Dr. Sharbe had noticed my wristwatch a few days earlier and had taken a good look at it. Without any hesitation she said she would like to have it, offering me her very old-fashioned large man's watch plus 500 roubles. I did not like the idea of such an exchange, more especially as the offer was so unexpected. I said in reply that the watch meant a lot to me as it had sentimental value and I could not sell it. I could only offer it to her as a gift on my liberation from the camp. My colleagues, especially Dr. A. Soltysik warned me that I must not forget that I was a prisoner and that Dr. Sharbe would, in view of my refusal, most probably seek to harm me in some way. I ought, for my own sake, to have accepted the proposal. Besides its great sentimental value, I had kept my watch in spite of previous monthly, very thorough searches in Odessa. I had

learned some useful tricks from some of the hardened offenders there. We had been issued with soap of a rather soft consistency and I kept three tablets, in one of which I hid my treasure. I could identify the particular tablet of course, although to a casual glance all three pieces were identical. Before leaving Odessa every prisoner had been searched again in the huge prison courtyard. There, one of the tablets of soap was cut to pieces by the security officer but luckily he cut the wrong one. However, I later received permission to wear the watch as a "medical aid." So I was not going to yield it to Dr. Sharbe without a struggle.

Two days later I was summoned to her office where she told me to make myself ready for a long journey on foot to a hospital in the far North situated 400 km from the present camp, near Vorkuta. She said how sorry she felt about this transfer but a doctor was urgently needed in the hospital and , as I was the youngest in the camp, she had to select me and was confident that I would be able to make the journey as I was in good health. Dr. Sharbe warned me that the Polish doctor at the exit gate would not help me to remain in the camp as she would send him a message cautioning him not to do so. At the gate there was always a doctor present when a convoy of prisoners was on the way out to any destination, and he had the authority to admit the prisoner to hospital or to delay his departure if he felt that he was not in a fit condition to undertake any travelling. Dr. Sharbe was extremely firm and advised me not to complain of diarrhoea as this would do me no good. I must go. I was stunned, but perceived the cause clearly and could see no alternative, no possibility of retreat. I intended to ring up Dr. Aleksandra but Dr. Sharbe gave instructions that I should not be allowed to communicate with anyone, especially not with Dr. Aleksandra. I was again being punished for not having learnt the bitter lesson that prisoners are barely human. In retrospect I reproached myself for refusing the proposed exchange of watches. All my colleagues felt distressed about my situation but blamed me, not unkindly, for having been unwise enough to refuse the woman's demand.

I left my wooden trunks in the camp, taking only a shirt, soap, toothbrush, toothpowder and my overcoat. With a group of about 350 prisoners, mainly Russians and a few Lithuanians, I left the camp feeling very downhearted after saying goodbye to my friends. The roads were covered with snow and it was bitterly cold. On the way one of the Lithuanians, a prisoner, was taken very ill and I requested the guards to assist me in arranging admission to a nearby hospital for this particular prisoner who had all the symptoms of acute cardiac failure. The guard in response jabbed me with his rifle accusing me of organising resistance

on the march, but eventually, seeing the man fighting for breath, helped me to get him to the nearest hospital.

It was a tedious day, I had only had a piece of bread throughout the whole day but I was not hungry. By evening our echelon reached a forest after a march of 40 kms and the guards ordered us to rest. The prisoners built a fire and within minutes I fell asleep in the snow. When I woke up in the morning I noticed that part of my short padded jacket had been damaged by the fire, but it no longer mattered to me. Survival was the only thing that counted now. We moved from the forest to a hilly open area and had to wait for a doctor from a nearby hospital whose function it was to find out whether any of the prisoners in the group were unfit for a further, very long walk. While we were waiting we heard a man's voice calling in Russian "Is there a doctor here?", to which the prisoners replied "da" (yes) "there is a Polish doctor". It was Vladimir, the felcher, who was also a prisoner employed in the nearby hospital. He immediately approached me and inspected my legs which were oedematous and smothered with a petechial rash. Vladimir concluded that I needed treatment and rest, that I was not fit for further walking, and the chief medical officer would decide upon my fate. The felcher was himself anxious to get an overcoat from someone in exchange for some favours. There were a few Lithuanians among the prisoners, one of whom had two overcoats and gladly offered Vladimir one, who contacted the guard and obtained all the necessary dossiers of the prisoners who would accompany him to the hospital, including the generous Lithuanian.

In the hospital Vladimir introduced me to the chief medical officer, the senior doctor of several hospitals, Dr. Sergei Andreyevich Yakovlenko, and handed over my records and also the order sending me to a destination in the far North. Dr. Sergei exchanged a few words with me and after a while tore up the order in my presence and said cheerfully that I was not to worry. He would be pleased to have me in his hospital, and if he was not well I would have to take care of him. All the prisoners who had been selected with me were kept together in a group in the hospital. Dr. Sergei suggested that I visit the Polish hairdresser prisoner and thereafter take a shower. I was assigned to a small clean room which I shared with an intelligent felcher, Victor Victorovich and so I found myself unexpectedly in the *Komi Republic Hospital,* officially recorded as 4th Section (IV Otdjelenie).

The next morning I was introduced to the medical staff at the hospital – to Dr. Natalya Sergieyevna Nise, Dr. Nina Georgivna Kalugina, Dr. Pyotr Pyotrovich Golovina and the Polish pharmacist, Mr. Krajewski. The

whole medical staff, including clerks, nurses and auxiliary assistants, were all prisoners with various sentences of up to 5–10 years, but Dr. Yakovlenko and Dr. Golovina could move about freely without a guard. The hospital was situated in the taiga*, and the ward buildings, offices and so on were in a better condition than the barracks in Krasnyj Paxar. It was a large hospital which served 15 or 20 labour camps (some prisoners called them colonies) scattered within a radius of 10–15 km. or more. The inmates carried out various types of work, particularly building railways. In every camp there was a commandant, a prisoner, who was in charge of two or three hundred other prisoners. A felcher was attached to every such camp and attended the inmates for minor ailments. If he could not manage severe cases it was his duty to escort them on foot, accompanied by a guard, to the general hospital.

In the hospital zone next to the entrance gate was a small building for the guards. Inside there was a waiting area with a consulting room for the prisoners brought in for examination from outside, and the whole area was fenced. About 30 to 40 per cent of the patients brought to us in the morning by the various felchers were suffering from diarrhoea with a blood content. They had to file up outside the fence and had to deliver "to order" a specimen of stool in the open air; if these patients were found not to be in a satisfactory condition they were admitted to the hospital. Prisoners with other complaints were examined in the consulting room inside the zone. The hospital was guarded by watch towers at each corner, manned by vigilant Russian soldiers with machine guns.

I was in charge of several wards and one of them was for female patients as the hospital also looked after one female labour camp. To my section were attached the following staff: Elena, a nurse aged 35 (before her arrest she had been a teacher), Nikolai, a tall, stout fellow aged 50 who had learned nursing in the hospital, and Sergei, a valuable and dedicated nursing auxiliary. The medical work here was more thorough and the atmosphere more relaxed and cooperative than in the previous hospital, since all the staff and the administrators were prisoners.

My experience garnered in previous camps was beneficial and came in very useful when dealing with complicated cases. Mr. Krajewski, the Polish pharmacist, contributed significantly to the teamwork in the hospital and he prepared a list of all available pharmaceutical preparations, which made prescribing much easier. I found his services of great value not only to me but to all the prisoners. I did my rounds in the morning and the afternoon, and my relations with the senior Doctor

*Coniferous forest.

were most friendly and harmonious, as they were with the whole staff. The patients in my wards were cardiac, gastric and chest cases, occasionally severe chilblains, but primarily pellagra cases accompanied by constantly recurring motions with blood. About 200 yards from the hospital there were a few buildings mainly designated for the convalescent prisoners. In charge of the convalescents' hospital were two Polish doctors, Drs. Slawinski and Duma. The latter died a few years ago in the United Kingdom and my relations with both of them were most cordial.

On the third Sunday after my arrival in the hospital a message was delivered to the wards on my rounds to pay a visit to Dr. Yakovlenko's office. He greeted me amicably and showed me a demand note addressed to him by the KGB giving me permission to call on the wife of the quartermaster who was not very well, but who lived outside though very near the hospital, and who had expressed a wish to be seen by the Polish doctor who had recently arrived. On Sunday afternoon, escorted by a guard, I went to see the "private patient". When I arrived at the place the guard asked my hosts what time I should be collected. The quartermaster was not a prisoner and he said that he would come to the hospital with me. I examined the patient, whose history was highly suggestive of a gall bladder infection, for which I recommended the appropriate diet and medicaments.

The host and hostess, a middle-aged couple, entertained me for hours. We played chess to the accompaniment of some sentimental Russian songs in the gramaphone, and finished with tea. This was a very emotional afternoon, such as I had not experienced since my arrest. I almost had the sensation of being welcomed by close relatives, and on parting was nearly reduced to tears. The host asked me whether he and his wife could call me by my first name and enquired whether the food in the hospital was sufficient and whether I was in need of money. I tried to assure them that I was well looked after and that the salary I received from the hospital was more than adequate. Aleksei Stepanovich, the host, remarked "You see, Yuliana, the doctor does not trust us". They did not seem to accept what I said and thought I doubted their sincerity. Then they asked me whether I would be searched on my return at the gate, and my reply was that I was not aware of the usual procedure as this was my first outing. I returned together with my host to the gate, said goodbye to Aleksei, and entered the hospital zone without being searched by the guard. The next morning, after my rounds, I discovered in my room under the cushion on my bed a precious parcel containing sausage, butter, dried fruit, ham and sugar, as though it came from a supermarket in the North. Naturally it was not difficult to guess my benefactor's name.

On the following Sunday I was called again but this time to the quartermaster who was taken ill. Yuliana was in good spirits. She felt better after my treatment and , thanking me for my services, apologised for calling me again on a Sunday to see her husband, Aleksei. This time I hesitated over my diagnosis as there was nothing particularly wrong with the patient except for a mild respiratory infection and it was not until late that I realised why I had been called. I stayed for a few hours, the atmosphere was as warm as before and we had a long and friendly talk – the puzzle was solved. The couple expressed the wish to have me every week or every second week, under the pretext of illness, as a friend, to spend an afternoon with them again and so to fill me with renewed optimism and hope for a better future. I thanked Aleksei for the generous supply of delicatessen found under my cushion which really was not necessary, but he denied that it was from him, and I well understood the reason for his denial. Again I was seen to the gate by him and entered without any search. These "Harley Street" visits continued almost up to the day of my release from the camp hospital.

The prisoner patients over 40 years of age and sometimes also of the younger group requested me on my rounds to prolong their stay in the hospital even for a few days. I accepted it as a natural reaction and fight for survival. The hospital prisoner patients had their regular meals, better washing facilities, more rest, and longer sleep. I tried my best to help them out when free beds were available. Special attention was paid to the needs of the pellagra patients who required higher calorie diets.

The provisions for the patients in the hospital were satisfactory considering that Russia was now at war with Germany, and provided delivery was not hindered by transport or bad weather. Food for the patients in the hospital consisted of cereals with oil, soup with cereals, smoked fish and two or three times weekly meat such as lamb, tinned tomato juice, about 200–300 g. of bread daily, occasionally sheep's liver, and some items of nutrition that were supplied in a dry form.

The twice-daily rounds in the hospital were smooth and peaceful, being accompanied by auxiliary staff, and as we were all prisoners the atmosphere under the circumstances was relaxed and definitely more bright than in the previous camp in Krasnyj Paxar. I also had to attend emergencies in my wards in the daytime and there was no day off.

The Chief Medical Officer's sentence was ten years and his assistant's 8 years of corrective labour camp. So far no Russian doctor had been checking on patients in my wards. The patients were of different nationalities, such as Russians, Poles, Lithuanians and Estonians, young and middle aged.

The prisoners in the hospital wards slept and rested on clean, wooden bunks with blankets and the conditions were superior to those in the tents or barracks. Medicines were prescribed on the rounds and dispensed by the Polish pharmacist and distributed in the afternoon and evening by the nurses.

In the camps the prisoners were living in marquees or wooden huts up to 150–200 in one unit. A ration of bread of 400–500 g. was distributed in the morning before going to work with a hot drink. The majority were working on building railway tracks leading to the North to Workuta, which was compulsory and most laborious work in the wintry months. The older ones, whenever possible, were allocated to indoor work. On return from work there was always a hot meal ready. I found out from the patients in the hospital that in their tents, blankets were provided for the wooden bunks. When the prisoner did not feel well he had to attend the morning surgery where a felcher prisoner was in charge and if the prisoner was feverish or had some minor stomach upsets he dispensed the necessary medicaments. In more severe cases the felcher had to decide whether to keep the patient under vigilance in the camp or convey him to the hospital. As a routine he used to assemble a few patients and deliver them on foot accompanied by a guard. The patients were examined by one of the hospital doctors, in the majority of cases by me. The ones who needed hospital treatment were admitted, and the others after examination were given the required medication and taken back to the camp.

I had in my wards an almost definite case of a perforated ulcer in a man of 40 and begged Dr. Yakovlenko to arrange a transfer for him to a surgical unit, but he was not very keen on the idea. He explained his refusal thus. "If a particular patient dies on the way to hospital there will be an enquiry and we would be responsible for his death. However, if he dies where he is now, no problems would arise." The prisoner died within about 48 hours and the post-mortem confirmed the diagnosis. A perforated gastric ulcer with a heavy haemorrage in the peritoneal cavity was found.

For the past three weeks I had had to sign all the certificates for those deaths which occurred in the hospitals in the zone, even if they were not patients from my wards. The KGB officers demanded 4 copies for each deceased prisoner, so I called at their office and requested exemption from signing death certificates of patients not under my care, after a moment of hesitation they consented to my request.

A week later a female prisoner from a female labour "colony" was

brought to the hospital in a coma. I did my best, brought all my experience to bear and used everything available in the hospital including oxygen, but she died within less than an hour. It was a camp regulation to diagnose a case before making a post-mortem, but I had difficulties in making even a tentative diagnosis. On reflection, I thought I would make an attempt to trace the records of the deceased. I spent some time studying the available records and luckily among the file I spotted that of Tanya. She was about 30 years of age and had been suffering from "hysterical fits', and these few lines gave me an unexpected insight. My provisional diagnosis before the post-mortem was either a cerebral tumour or a cerebral haemorrhage due to status eiplepticus. There was no history of sugar diabetes. I carried out the post-mortem examination, as usual in the presence of two high ranking experienced officers, and a tumour was found in the brain. The pathology report about 2 weeks later was glioma. The officers congratulated me on my pre-post-mortem diagnosis, probably unaware that I had had access to Tanya's records.

While on my rounds in my wards I came across a patient – a young Pole about 28 – feverish, who had suffered from furunculosis*[1] in the past two weeks but whose urine was sugar free. He now complained of right-sided pain in the back and also in the front. I examined him thoroughly and requested Dr. Yakovlenko to have a look at the patient as I suspected a subphrenic*[2] abscess. Dr. Yakovlenko, accompanied by me, interviewed and examined the patient, Mr. Romanowski, and expressed the opinion that I might be right. I already knew that Dr. Soltysik, the surgeon, was working in a surgical unit about some 20–25 km. from our hospital and I approached Dr. Yakovlenko about the possibility of the patient being seen by a surgeon. He approved my suggestion and within 24 hours Dr. Soltysik accompanied by a guard and a nurse arrived and also made a provisional diagnosis of a right subphrenic abscess. The patient was transferred to hospital, to the surgical unit, and two days later a message was received by telephone that the Polish patient had, in fact, a subphrenic abscess and he had stood the operation well.

One day during my rounds I stopped to examine Mr. Lepp, a tall thin gentleman over 60. I was very much concerned about his health as he was in cardiac failure and his condition over the past 2 weeks had deteriorated. Mr. Lepp asked me to spare some time for him when I had finished my rounds as he wished me to enter in my Polish vade mecum

*[1]Presence of boils (furuncles) in different parts of the body.
*[2]Abscess under the diaphragm (partition separating thorax from abdomen).

his wife's address. Some of the patients in the wards knew that I registered from time to time some "mysterious facts" in that book which survived many searches, most probably because I kept it among my Russian books. Mr. Lepp had sensed that he was very ill and hoped that one day I might be set free and would then convey a last message to his wife. He wanted to tell her of the deep love and devotion he had always felt towards her throughout their married life, and he prayed daily for her good health and safety. It was a very moving moment and he felt relieved as I wrote down in his presence his wife's address: Miryam Lepp, Estonia, Kusa Joam Kurtna, Postkast 11. I had the impression that Mr. Lepp had held a ministerial post in the Estonian government before the Russians occupied Estonia. I could see that his condition was indeed worsening from hour to hour and Natalya, the doctor, offered me half a bottle of wine for him to make his last hours more tolerable and to allow him to pass away in peace.

In the second half of July a young Russian surgeon Dr. Aleksandrovich came to the hospital. He performed operations in a very primitive camp theatre. Quite often during the operations I had to open the atlas of anatomy to help him out, and nurses, always assisted him. I remember a case of echinococcus hydatid of the liver* in a female patient from my ward, aged about 50, admitted from a female camp. She complained of abdominal discomfort and pain, her cardiac condition was not satisfactory, the liver was enlarged, multiple cysts were felt on palpation, and the abdomen was distended. I requested the Russian surgeon to see the patient as I wanted his opinion. After his examination the surgeon ordered the nurse to transfer the patient to the theatre and prepare the necessary instruments for exploratory examination of the cysts. Dr. Aleksandrovich confirmed my suggested diagnosis and instructed me to carry out an exploratory aspiration of the cysts in his presence, and when that was done, the aspirated fluid was sent to the laboratory of a specialist hospital. As soon as the diagnosis was confirmed some days later he treated the patient surgically, but unfortunately she died on the fourth day after the operation. I recall having seen only one case of echinococcus*[3] disease while at medical school and this was only the second one I had come across since then.

The Russian surgeon was not a prisoner and he treated me well. The Russian government assigned him to various camp hospitals for several months to learn surgery in a rough way.

It came to my knowledge from a newcomer, a graduate pharmacist from Kiev, who was sent for six months training in the hospital, that the

*[3]Infestation of the alimentary tract with animal parasites.

majority of graduates were posted to various hospitals for training, as in the case of Dr. Aleksandrovich, just to acquire some tough experience during their stay. This was official and had to be accepted without quibble.

It was lonely in my room now as I had lost my good friend the felcher Victor Victorovich, who had been making preparations for a getaway. Victor accumulated vitamins, enough food for 10 days and took for granted that his escape would be a success. He had all the required papers with official stamps and everything planned in a most professional manner. About that time there was a KGB officer in his wards so Victor was going to make use of his uniform and take with him one patient, a prisoner whom he trusted, who would figure in his papers as a prisoner to be delivered to the court by a KGB officer, i.e. Victor. He begged me to join him but I had no intention of participating in such a folly and, on the contrary, I warned him that although he was a Russian by birth he had no chance in the present circumstances in an area covered by so many camps. In my opinion it was a tremendous risk with a very remote possibility of achieving freedom. Victor packed up one evening when he was on duty and disappeared with another prisoner. The next morning the KGB officers interrogated me to find out whether I had any knowledge of Victor's escape and naturally I had to say no. There were rumours in the hospital that 2 days later Victor was tracked down by KGB officers and their police dog within a radius of about 30 km. from his starting point, and had been seen since then by some prisoners who said that his face was bruised and that he looked very distressed and altered almost beyond recognition after those few days of semi-freedom.

Sometimes in the afternoon we doctors used to meet each other to discuss medical problems. I never talked politics and if anyone started I paid no attention and expressed no opinion. I liked talking to Natalya and Nina. Natalya, a lady of 60 with grey hair, shared her room with Nina; however they did not get on well with each other. Without any prompting, Natalya told me the short story of how she had landed here. She was friendly with a Polish princess, Lubomirska, who was arrested one day, and thereafter all her friends, among them Natalya, were interrogated and she was detained. Natalya was almost certain that Nina was spying in the hospital for the KGB and, in return for these services, she was supplied by them with cosmetics and dresses. Natalya cautioned me on more than one occasion about discussing political problems with Nina as months ago a Polish doctor had talked too much and he was posted to the North for general labour. Once the KBG officers had established the prisoners' weaknesses and profiles of their characters they made use of their services.

I moved about inside the zone with Nina just for exercise in the restricted area in which were offices, hospitals, various buildings and "private dwellings". When the weather was fine I liked to walk during the northern evenings illuminated by the Northern lights, like in the daytime, and admire the green sky and sunset. Nina knocked at my room quite often for me to go for a walk with her, or she called at the wards on my rounds and took me under her arm just for a walk and a long talk. I liked her in many ways, she was intelligent, read a lot and always had a smile for me. She was well-dressed, young and good looking, but I could not make out whether she was sincere. We were friendly, but that was all. One day after our afternoon rounds she knocked on my door and we had a very cordial talk, rather personal for the first time. She asked me about my life in Poland before my arrest and about my family. It was a very pleasant, amusing and relaxing afternoon. In turn I asked her about her family and then suddenly someone knocked at the door. It was Sergei, the male nurse, apologising for calling me as I was needed to see a patient in my ward who had suddenly deteriorated. Whether this was true or not I did not speculate on at the time, or whether it was an intentional "safety" move by the nurse. I had the impression that Sergei watched me as he was scared in case I got involved with Nina, whom he did not trust. He confided in me one day that before his detention he was in charge of a tin factory in Moscow. He was arrested by the KGB officers for alleged mismanagement and was sentenced to 5 years in a corrective labour camp. I never discussed with him his private life, but he suggested that he could accommodate me in Moscow and could help me to settle down there when the time came for me to be set free. I expressed my thanks for his good intentions saying that in the meantime I had to stay in the camp for over a year and the war was still on, and who knew what might happen during that time. Sergei respected me and in turn I treated him with courtesy and I had every confidence in him.

Sasha (diminutive of Aleksandra, or Aleksander), a free nurse who worked in the convalescent ward, called to see me one morning by appointment. She besought me with tears in her eyes for advice and effective help. According to her statement she had been raped by a prisoner and was pregnant. The Court, however, did not accept her version. It accused her of provocative and inciting behaviour, and had already sentenced her to 2 years in a corrective labour colony, to be effective after her confinement. Much as I would have liked to help her, it was now too late to begin issuing certificates. Poor Sasha!

At the end of July, I was summoned to Dr. Yakovlenko's office. There was a message from the KGB to the hospital requiring me to call at a camp situated about 12 km. from the hospital in order to see the camp

commandant who had been taken ill. I had to walk there – a sort of "globe trot" enabling me to have a good look at the taiga – while my guard, equipped with a gun, was enjoying himself on horseback conveying a "most dangerous prisoner" who might endeavour to escape. I did not mind slow jogging as the weather was fine and I had not had the opportunity for longer walks for some time. The taiga looked monotonous, the trees were dwarfish and birds were hardly seen. The guard occasionally asked me whether I was tired but otherwise said nothing. We reached the camp and I was welcomed by the commandant in a comradely way – after all we were both prisoners. I had a shower followed by lunch, after which he wanted to introduce me to the prisoners. We entered into one of the tents and he called for attention as in the army. All the prisoners then stood to attention, showing both discipline and respect.

I examined the commandant in his room, which was clean and well kept. I noted his medical history and then gave him a thorough check-up, which took me a good hour. The physical examination was highly suggestive of a peptic ulcer. I recommended a diet and promised that an appropriate medication would be prepared in the hospital so that the felcher could collect it. If some necessary drugs were required in the hospital and were not available, the next best had to be dispensed. The commandant thanked me wholeheartedly for my visit and the care taken with his examination, hoping he would make good progress. He was advised to report to Dr. Yakovlenko in 6 weeks' time about his progress and the decision would then be made as to whether an X-ray examination was necessary. I returned to the hospital to report to Dr. Yakovlenko, hoping that I would not have to answer many such calls.

The next morning a young Russian prisoner was admitted to my wards suspected of a self-inflicted injury – cutting off one of his fingers. The case was investigated by the Court and the proceedings proved that the prisoner had done it deliberately so as to be admitted to the hospital for a long rest and subsequently to be assessed for light work. He was sentenced by the Court to an additional one year, to be spent in a corrective labour colony. A Russian lawyer prisoner whom I met in the first camp had mentioned to me the problem of self-inflicted injuries carried out in despair by exhausted prisoners. I could hardly believe it at that time, but then I had never had to endure the physical hardship and back-breaking toil of the great mass of prisoners on the pitifully inadequate rations that led to the malnutrition I was always treating.

There were days when I worked with enthusiasm and was able to give help to my fellow prisoners, which was very satisfying. But there were

also moments when I lacked stimulation. Dr. Yakovlenko, although always friendly, tried to "open my eyes" as a non-Russian who did not know enough about Russia. He mentioned newspaper reports that a pact had been arranged between Marshal Stalin and the Polish General Sikorski that all Polish prisoners in Russia since the war would be set free in due course in order to join the Forces and fight the Germans. The doctor looked round in his office just to be safe and assure himself there were only the two of us in the room. He said "Yasha, listen to me. I must tell you, in case if you are not already aware of it, that the Russians are the biggest liars in the world." He questioned the dependability of the agreement, saying that in Russia it might take years between the making of such a pact and its fulfilment. Then he spoke about Russian society, about the Russian regime, the spirit of the times, and the trend of the present local and central authorities. He added "Yours' is a small sentence, the shortest of the whole medical staff here. I would be surprised it they let you go after the termination of yours. They would offer you a good position and location and if you turn it down they might invent some reason to prolong your prisoner status." He continued, "we respect you here as a true colleague, and we like the way you are treating all the patients with the same care, without regard to their nationality. We trust you and appreciate your thoroughness. Think very carefully how you respond to the KGB officers, and don't be over enthusiastic in advance in case the amnesty does not prove to be genuine."

It was already August 1941 when I was called to Dr. Yakovlenko's office after my morning rounds. I was required to attend the security office, although no-one seemed to know the reason for this summons. I felt disturbed as I was told that this was something out of the ordinary, and even the Senior Medical Officer had no idea why I had been called. He mentioned however that this was a branch KGB office but rather more extreme that the usual one.

I arrived at the security office, outside the hospital, escorted by a guard. In an almost dark room there was a middle-aged officer I had never met before who ordered me to make a full examination of a Russian prisoner of about 30 years of age who was sitting in the same room. This examination was performed in the presence of the officer, who forbade me to ask the prisoner any questions. To begin with I was puzzled and tried to guess what lay behind it. The officer was a witness to the proceedings so that I did not have any opportunity to acquaint myself with the prisoner's situation or the reason for this consultation, which lasted a considerable time. When I had finished, the prisoner was

moved to another room and I had to write my report. By this time I was almost completely confirmed in be belief judging by my previous experience, that the main concern in this case was to assess the prisoner's fitness for work. When I had completed my "evaluation" the officer asked whether I had come to a conclusion as to the prisoner's competence for work. I had now therefore to be both diplomatic and precise, and my response was that the examined prisoner was fit, to the best of my knowledge, for light work for the next two weeks and thereafter should be re-examined. My medical examination indicated that the prisoner was recovering from a feverish illness and was at present convalescent. I was then asked whether the prisoner had been able to do some work in the past two weeks, to which I replied that I had not done any clinical tests such as a blood test, urine test, chest X-ray, so I was not in a position to pass any judgement on the last interrogation. I was required to examine the man, which I had done, and I had put in writing my report of whatever I had found on physical examination. However, if he wished me to put some questions to the prisoner, I would do so. The officer's terse response was that this was unnecessary. He would study the report and if there were any further queries to be answered I would be summoned again.

A week later one of the guards, Andrei, who always tried to be kind and more humane, told me that the prisoner whom I had examined had been court marshalled and shot for refusing to work. At that time "otkazchik" was the Russian expression for a prisoner who refused to work. I never found out the truth about what had happened in this case.

Elena, the nurse, when she was on duty in August assisted me on the rounds taking all the messages with the greatest care. She was a teacher by profession and during one of the evening meetings of teachers in Moscow, which looked like an innocuous gathering, some had complained of unsatisfactory payments for their work. That night, the KGB carried out a raid, and arrested all the speakers. They were later prosecuted and sent to corrective labour camps. Elena herself had been one of the speakers. She was about 35 years of age, had a family in Moscow and was very concerned about their safety. Although always depressed by her fears, she had proved to be a most conscientious worker.

There were no special restrictions for the medical staff. I could shave myself daily. My room was kept clean for me and I could change my shirt almost every day. Each afternoon we were counted in the wards just to make sure that we were all alive and no-one had fancied taking the risk of escaping. On rare occasions Andrei, the guard, whose parents were

of Polish extraction, used to give me secretly some old Russian newspapers so that I had some idea of the news.

On one occasion a KGB officer who had known me well gave me some information about Cracow saying, "Dr. Geller, I have some very good news for you, which was practically confirmed by our broadcasts. Cracow is under German occupation but will soon be liberated by the Russians".

The majority of patients in the wards suffered from diarrhoea which contained mucous mixed with blood. Some of these cases were caused by pellagra. Dr. Yakovlenko himself, the senior officer, and the chief medical officer of the hospital, as well as other high ranking officers and also prisoners who were in charge of the administration, came under my care as a result of the above condition. I tried among other remedies charcoal and bismuth. Our pharmacist was very resourceful and prepared charcoal for our use from the dwarf birches growing in the taiga. Non-pellagra diarrhoea responded to the above two remedies but the diarrhoea due to pellagra was resistant to treatment. Proper nutrition was the only effective one. I myself developed an attack of "haemocolit" but simply had to endure it and carry on with my normal work in spite of the difficulty.

On 30th August, 1941, just when I was about to get up, there was an unexpected knock on the door. When I opened it, the messenger gave me the news with great excitement, that all the Poles were to be set free. In this camp situated so far in the North behind the Pechora River it sounded more like a dream, totally divorced from reality. I was one of the first in the hospital to whom this historic message was delivered. I was called to the KGB office in the hospital where the officer in charge proclaimed my freedom in a ceremonial way. He suggested that I remain in Russia as a free doctor and would be offered a good position due to my experience and speaking fluent Russian. I could settle down to start a new life. The officer warned me that North Russia was the safest place at that time as the actual war had just started between Russia and her allies against the Nazis. I expressed my thanks to him and explained my present situation; that my parents were in Yoshkar Ola and my duty was to find them; that I would look for a job in a hospital to be near enough to help. The officer shook hands with me and wished me every success.

I rushed to the convalescent hospital accompanied by a guard to share this momentous development with my colleagues. I was given a hero's welcome by the Poles and both doctors declared that they were immediately going to prepare a list of Poles fit for discharge and the long

journey which was then to be expected. I returned to the hospital where I met Dr. Yakovlenko and besides him the Assistant Director of Medical Services who expressed the wish to accompany me on my rounds. Their presence was justified if only to check whether I was going to release the right patients for a rather long and complicated journey by train, commercial trucks, on foot and by boat. In any case I would not have risked removing sick and debilitated Poles thus involving them in the extra risk of travelling in an unfavourable environment.

It was a day of mixed feelings, a day of joy and sadness as I had to leave behind my patients, countrymen who were not in good enough shape to be able to venture on such a strenuous undertaking. A compassionate security officer warned me again that I should think it over before going away, as the war was at present at its worst and I would be safer remaining where I was. In a carefully controlled voice I replied that I had no intention of quitting Russia but that I had a moral obligation towards my parents who were now in Russia. I then had to say goodbye to all the doctors, nurses, felchers, and medical auxiliaries with whom I had established a cordial friendship over the months of working closely together. The majority of the staff and patients tried to conceal their feelings but Natalya, whom I thanked warmly for her kindness and friendship, was unable to control her tears. She embraced me like a mother and ran into the hospital, and Misha, the baker, and Sergei, the nurse, called once more in Russian "all the very best". We were directed to the nearby convalescent hospitals escorted by a guard, then every Pole whose name was read out had to go behind the fence where he was searched by the security officer. When it came to my turn, the KGB officer wanted to take away a woollen blanket which had been given to me by Sergei. The clerk in charge of labour distribution, Steypan, raised his voice and said to the KGB officer abusively, "Aren't you ashamed to be searching our doctor?". As a result of Steypan's intervention the security officer left the blanket alone.

We, the liberated prisoners, escorted by a few guards, then marched to a very small station. Suddenly an order was issued by the guards that we should return to the hospital as bad weather was forecast. I was pleased to a certain extent as my diarrhoea still persisted and I was glad to have another day's rest in the hospital and continue my treatment with bismuth and charcoal. The next morning the same routine proceedings were followed and I had to go through another emotional ceremony and say goodbye once more to all the doctors. It was especially painful to part from Natalya again, since it was obviously a great mental strain and effort for her. This time we arrived safely at the tiny station in the taiga still in Komi. We were packed into heavy goods trucks and after a short trip of

about a couple of hours we reached Kaninosa, the transit camp where I had worked in May 1941 and which I remembered so well. I recognised it at once as the same guard who used to call out the prisoners' names from the records with all the details and the appropriate sentences was still on the gate. My two wooden trunks which had been left during my transfer by foot to the northern hospital I found intact and waiting for me to collect. The atmosphere at Kaninosa was very like being in a beehive, and I had the pleasure of encountering again a number of my friends, among others, Dr. M. Cichy, Dr. Ptaszynski and Dr. Martin Shenberg. They were in good health. I was glad also to see Elek Bucheister from Cracow, whose sister Mrs. G. Mark was a close friend of my wife. He used to call to my room in the hospital in the first camp, requesting me amongst other things to keep under my care food parcels received from his family, as it was not safe to keep them in the barrack. We talked about a brighter future and meeting again in Cracow. Elek's health was satisfactory and I assumed that he was going to join the Polish Forces.

On 10th September, 1941, we were at last presented with the official documents of acquittal confirming our release. At the same time every person set free was given on discharge a fixed gratuity so that one could buy provisions in the camp shop for a long journey, including bread, sugar, tinned food and maxorka (Russian tobacco). From Kaninosa camp we walked through woodland to the Pechora River where hundreds and hundreds of Poles were arriving from various places, all of whom had to be directed to a transit camp where the official documents of freedom had to be handed out. We waited our turn and eventually the motor boat appeared, pulled up and took us a further stage on our journey. Seagulls flew overhead as though bidding us farewell. The sky was almost sea green and the roar of the waves embodying the elemental power of nature was for us so overwhelming that our experiences of deprivation and humiliation in an upsurge of joy were all forgotten, for a few seconds at least. The crossing of the Pechora took an hour, after which we stepped ashore where our documents had again to be verified. Our final objective was to reach Tockoye where the Polish army in Russia had to be created, organised and subsequently quit Russia to join the Allied Forces.

## UPON LIBERATION JOINED THE POLISH FORCES VISIT TO MY PARENTS AND DEPARTURE FROM RUSSIA

## CHAPTER 3

I reached Tockoye, the assembly headquarters of the Polish Forces on 23rd September, 1941, where I quickly adjusted to the new camp environment. I realised that the war between the U.S.A., the U.K. and the Russians, now fighting as allies against Germany was gradually expanding. The first night I spent in a stable without walls. Some of the early arrivals had been fortunate enough to manage to find a berth for themselves in the mangers, but I and a few of my friends had no alternative but to attempt to sleep on the ground. We lay down and actually fell asleep quickly, but unfortunately the silence of the night was soon interrupted by the crashing fall of the crowded racks of the mangers. As our luggage, and not our heads. lay under the mangers, by a stroke of sheer luck we escaped injury. It was a rather cool evening, and since our first sleep had been so rudely disturbed, we lit a small fire outside our "headquarters", as we found plenty of broken pieces of boards round the place. Apart from this disturbance the rest of the night was quiet and I had a little nap sitting beside the fire.

Within three days I was allocated to the medical unit in Tockoye, I soon found that conditions were hardly better, and in some aspects worse, than in the camps I had left. In the barracks, the officers slept on planks and the NCOs on the bare floor. I had scouted around and found some wooden boards nearby, guarded by a soldier. Obviously great care would be needed to steal the treasure, so I organised a night raid with some colleagues. We had to crawl to where the soldier sat dozing by the fire, carefully extract the precious boards, and steal away. Other excursions also proved fruitful, resulting in a measure of relief at night for all of us.

It was cheering to find among those awaiting transit a number of medical colleagues from past camps and even from Cracow. And yet the fact of being at Tockoye, en route to freedom, was something of an anti-climax. I lay awake at night worrying about my family, and making myself ill enough to have to report to the Army Clinic, where I was seen by a dermatologist. The condition cleared up on its own, and was probably psychosomatic. Until the news of our release, the imagining of that event and the idealised vision of a grand family reunion had kept my spirits buoyant for the most part. Now that joyous occasion seemed as far off as ever. I was in a state of limbo, living in a kind of emotional tundra.

As always in life, and especially in captivity, periods of low morale alternated with times of spiritual upliftment. The Eve of the Day of Atonement was one such. An orthodox Jewish soldier from Tarnov in Poland conducted the service in Hebrew, giving to the opening Kol Nidrei a depth of feeling that moved the assembly to tears of relief after the deprivations they had endured. It was an evening to cherish all one's life, and its setting in a bleak barrack without doors or windows seemed only to emphasise our need for divine guidance at this time.

Meanwhile there were things to occupy our time. I was assigned to the Conscription Board with two colleagues, our task being to examine all the new conscripts from various Russian camps to determine their fitness for military service. We ourselves were eligible, and were obliged to undergo training. This involved morning drill and weapon training by professional instructors. I viewed it with apprehension, but at least it was better than having time on one's hands for brooding.

On completion of the programme, I was given three stripes and assigned to a battalion as their doctor. By now, it was winter, and I found myself under canvass with the troops. We shared the tasks of keeping the tent tidy and collecting wood daily for the fire. At Christmas, the Commanding Officer invited me for dinner to his tent, where we spent an enjoyable few hours breaking the traditional thin wafers and exchanging wishes for the safe return to our loved ones.

Food supplies and other items were in perpetual short supply, necessitating forays into a market town, about 18–20 kms. from camp via the local railway, where we bought or bartered some of the things we needed. In Tockoye itself was a universal store ("univermag"), where books in Russian were available at a very low price. The shop was simply loaded with them. When I called in one day looking for an unusually large book the girl assistant, who had attended me several times before, said how impressed she was with Polish culture and how intelligent the Polish soldiers must be, as they so regularly came in to buy Russian books. I thanked her for her charming compliments and did not care to tell her the truth – that no toilet paper was available in the camp and the Russian books were eagerly pressed into service.

Time began to hang heavily. I needed news of my people. Then, through the good offices of Lt. Colonel Dr. Adam Soltysik, I obtained leave to visit my parents who had been deported from Poland to Russia and who now lived in Gomzowo, a small village about 6–7 km. from the town of Yoshkar Ola, in the Marijskaya Republic. They had given permission after the amnesty to live in a place of their own choosing.

On the day of departure, I struggled with my two wooden trunks to the railway station some 4 kms. distant. But this was to be a long and tedious journey, complicated by many changes of train, the unpredictability of the skeleton service through shortage of rolling stock, and that infamous Russian winter despaired of by Napoleon. I was fortunate to be provided with a huge loaf of bread, baked specially for me by a fellow prisoner I first met in Odessa and who now ran the Tockoye camp bakery. This and the warmed drinking water picked up at wayside stations had to sustain me through the several days travelling it took to reach Kuybyshev, where I got out to face an indeterminate wait for a different train.

The situation looked hopeless. Hundreds of people were trying to sleep on the stone floors of the station, not knowing when a train might be due, or whether they could get on it when it did arrive. I spoke to a depressed looking Pole, Jan Domanski, declared unfit for active military service on account of a bad limp, who begged me for help. Almost in despair, I found a Polish Embassy in the town, where I met Professor Kot. I asked him if he could find accommodation for Domanski and myself. He could offer nothing. I made other enquiries, finally being referred to a Polish General Berling, who was in the town. He suggested that I go to a Russian hostel near the station where I should find a bed and be able to remain until my departure for Yoshkar Ola. He also advised me to attend the Russian military shop for my daily ration, where on producing my leave and army papers, I would be able to obtain what was due to me. This I received regularly, without any difficulty and also without payment. I shared the rations with Domanski. General Berling assured me that, as far as he was aware, there would be a train to Kazan, on the way to Yoshkar Ola, in 8 days' time. He warned me I would have to fight to get on the train as hundreds of people were waiting for it. If, however, I missed it, my chances of getting another train in time to reach my parents were very slim.

One day while queueing up in the station to get into the restaurant for some hot soup, a Russian guard, who noticed me dressed in a long military overcoat, took me out of the queue and led me into the restaurant, thus saving me further waiting. Although I had about 100 roubles with me, I had to be careful not to spend too much since the immediate future was so uncertain. Luckily on the exact date given by the General the train arrived at about midnight. Boarding it proved to be an unforgettable battle, like an episode from Dante's Inferno, but both Domanski and I eventually succeeded in getting on. We were squeezed into the Pullman compartment and were lucky enough to get one seat which we took turns to occupy. The remaining passengers were Russians and were most friendly towards us. We arrived after some

three or four days at a small station called Rozayewka, and there I had to change and wait for another train.

During the first few days no-one was able to give me any information about when this train would arrive. Luckily in the station waiting room I met a most pleasant Russian couple about 50 years' old with their young daughter. They asked me to accept them as relatives so that they would be able to get on the train as a soldier's family, and in gratitude they would provide me with food. I could see that they had with them two cans of pickled cucumbers and tomatoes, also some meat and ham. In the meantime, I found out from the station master that a Pullman was expected within a few days, in the afternoon. I enjoyed the company of my newly adopted relatives, Igor and Irina, and their daughter. They were most attractive and intelligent people and their help meant that I would no longer starve. But poor Domanski, from over-indulgence in pickled cucumber, developed diarrhoea and stomach ache!

As soon as the promised train arrived in the early afternoon. I forced my way in and occupied one compartment but, while fighting to get on to it, a petty thief snatched the belt from my overcoat, and I missed this very much. The train, however, did not go straight to Kazan and I was told that I would have to change yet again before Kazan to Yoshkar Ola. It was already dark when we arrived at our second stop, a small village where the station master told me to stay for the night and promised, as there were no more trains expected, that I would be able to continue my journey the next morning. He recommended a place where we could sleep on the floor, somewhere in the village about 2 km. from the station, and so I left my luggage in his office and we went to look for the place. We finally found it as he had said, and an elderly Russian lady living alone brought us some straw so that we could sleep on the floor. Next morning we got up early and had a cup of tea. I paid a few roubles for the night's stay and we rushed to the station. At first the conductress would not let me on as I did not have a reserved seat. However when I offered her a few tablets of Aspirin and some cigarettes, permission was granted. It was still winter and the roads were covered in thick and heavy snow, but inside the train it was really warm as it was absolutely packed. About midday I arrived in Yoshkar Ola, on about the 8th or 9th February, 1942.

I went to the town Major, introduced myself in Russian, and upon producing my army papers was provided with sledges and a soldier to guide us to our destination. It took us about 40 minutes to reach the village where my family was living, and at last the moment I had lived for during all those interminable months was upon me. The joy of my

the Commander-in-Chief of the Army, I was released from active service as from 1st December 1943 up to 30th November 1944, and assigned as civilian doctor to the Polish refugees in Persia.

When I checked the list of the doctors relieved from active service, I was very disturbed to notice that, of the thirty doctors discharged, twenty-five were Jewish. This could not be mere coincidence. Or could it? I remembered that I was in Iraq, it was rumoured that when the Polish Director of Medical Services went through the list of doctors and noticed a lot of Jewish names he was not very happy. Apparently realising that too many Jewish doctors might soon be upgraded, he simply refused the suggestion made by the British authorities. At that time I rejected the story as being due to "Jewish imagination", or "a Jewish complex". However, in view of the new facts, I asked myself why I had been moved from my unit to attend the doctors' Cadet School during such very hot months, a move which had not done me any good at all. By this time I had lost interest, and the uncertainties of the new situation, together with never-ending worry about my wife and parents, robbed me of sleep. For the first time since my release from the Russian camps, I felt disillusioned and very bitter.

## IN TRANSIT FROM EGYPT FOR A NEW ASSIGNMENT TO THE POLISH REFUGEES IN ISFAHAN AND TEHERAN

## CHAPTER 7

I was called to the hospital office and seen by the Aide-de-Camp, Dr. Grembecki, who expressed his thanks for my efficient work in the camp hospital. He added that the Commanding Officer had asked him to thank me for my devoted and impressive medical service to the soldiers. He also mentioned that I would be given a special letter as an introduction to the C.O. of the Polish General Hospital in Teheran, Major Rogowski. I discovered later that I was the only doctor in the group discharged from the Forces for one year to have been called to see the Aide-de-Camp.

I felt very sad at parting from the hospital staff and patients and began to feel that I might be moved from place to place like a piece of luggage perpetually en route to somewhere else.

On my arrival at the station, the Polish Military Police checked my suitcase and even my diary and some letters. I was shocked, as they knew me very well and had, in fact, been under my care as patients. Perhaps their officiousness was due to pique, as they had invited me for a drink before my departure and I had not had time to join them.

On arrival in Rechovot the Army bus took me to the transit camp in Baszit. I was allocated to the tent reserved for doctors relieved from active service, and then reported my arrival to the office where I came face to face with my previous army superior, Lt. Col. Lechowski. He was obviously surprised to see me but welcomed me warmly and jokingly asked me "Who arranged this transfer for you? You must be a clever fellow. We are moving forward and you backward."

However, I explained to him that the drafting had been very much against my wishes. He thereupon called in his Aide-de-Camp, Mr. Kruczkowski, and ordered him, in my presence, to send a petition to the higher authorities with a request for my promotion. Lt. Col. Lechowski said. "We must do this for Dr. Geller, he has worked hard and well and was a good doctor much liked by the soldiers". I thanked him warmly for this.

It was now 30th November and it was very pleasant to see that the Commandant of our transport was Lt. Sierakowski, who was well known to me from the Russian camps. But the indifference to our well-being from officialdom was soon apparent, as we were loaded up with eighteen doctors and their luggage in one lorry and there was hardly room to

breathe. No-one from the office of the D.M.S. bothered to come to see how cramped we were, or even to bid us farewell. I felt humiliated. So this was the way we were repaid for our services. This was how our superiors chose to destroy our loyalty.

We stopped in Mafrak and slept in a camp in the same place where we had rested with the Polish General Hospital No. 1 on 8th September on the way to Egypt. We were once more involved in a return journey. I had some soup prepared by the cook and I ate a few biscuits but I did not fancy anything else. My most faithful friend on such journeys was my field bed purchased in the officers' shop. I always had it handy with blankets, mess tin, shaving equipment and a toothbrush. This I had learned always to do in the Army.

The next day, after an overnight stop at Mafrak, we found ourselves in contact with the British. I was full of admiration at the way they were organised, even in the desert. Near to our camp were NAAFI stores where we went for an evening meal. On the following morning we were given an order to remain the same camp, H4, and some time later we found out that all convoys for Teheran had been stopped. We guessed that most probably the big conference between Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin was taking place in Teheran.

That day was memorable for other reasons. I experienced another of my recurrent nightmares, tossing and turning restlessly, unable to escape the image in my mind of my wife lying pale-faced on a stretcher. In this unhappy manner, the night passed with painful slowness into morning.

Later in the morning, when we were ordered to continue our journey, aircraft flew over our little convoy. We found out later that the allied conference had indeed taken place in Teheran on 1st and 2nd December and that the planes we had seen were carrying Churchill and Roosevelt among others.

On the evening of 10th December, Friday, we arrived at the small junction of UR, and it came to my mind that according to the Bible, Ur of the Chaldees was the cradle of Abraham. It was a lovely starlit night and I wanted to take a quick look round and find someone who could tell me about the place, but lack of time forced me to give up the idea. Next day we arrived at a place called Shuaibah (pronounced Shaibah) from where we were transported to Zobair Camp, stopping overnight and then proceeding via Basra to Ahwaz in Persia, reputedly one of the very hottest places on the globe.

From here we continued our journey the next day by train, and according to the information given to me, passed through more than ninety tunnels, the total length being 30 km. and the longest tunnel 2½ km. This amazing complex was due to the fact that the railway track ran through the mountains of Elburz. It was a very unusual journey, constantly alternating night and day. We passed Sultanabad, well known for the manufacture of carpets, and at 3 p.m. arrived at the ancient city of Qum, where a British field kitchen welcomed us with lunch.

On arrival at the station in Teheran on 15th December 1943, we were welcomed by the Chief of the Medical Services already known to me from Guzary. He immediately allocated most unfairly, actually on the station itself, some assignments mainly amongst his friends, which reminded me of a rich uncle from the U.S.A., who on alighting from his train, immediately distributed presents among his waiting relatives!

From the camp I could see the chain of the Elburz mountains covered with snow, a most impressive backdrop to the new location. I delivered the letter which was given to me by the Aide-de-Camp of the Polish General Hospital No. 1 to the C.O. of the Polish Hospital in Teheran, Major Rogowski, and then went to see my close friend from Cracow, Dr. Martin Shenberg, working at the Teheran Hospital. He was very upset when I saw him as he had just had, that same day, very sad news about his in-laws who had perished during the Nazi occupation.

Later I received through the Polish Delegation in Teheran news from the Australian Embassy in Moscow, mentioning by name the whole of my family and my wife's family, and assuring me that they were all in good health. I was advised at the same time that if they were not registered I should do so immediately and put them on the list for evacuation from Russia as the family of a soldier. This I did. The Polish Delegate promised to post it to the Australian Embassy in Moscow. In the same building there was a section dealing with sending parcels to Polish families and there I also registered giving the names of my family.

So, unexpectedly. Fate had brought me to the country where centuries before Cyrus and Darius had reigned. Teheran had been the capital of Persia since 1787. The majority of the houses in the city had been built in the 19th century but the government buildings, museums, library, the Shah's palace, and the villas of the rich Persians were all contemporary. According to the census of 1943 there were about 835,000 inhabitants. Near to Teheran were the ruins of an old town, Rey, where Alexander the Great of Macedonia reputedly stayed during conquest of Persia.

With time on my hands while awaiting a new appointment, I went

sightseeing in Teheran. The attraction of this soon palled with the cost of everything, and in any case I had other things on my mind. One day I called at the office of a Persian firm called Monozon who distributed leaflets in Polish concerning the sending of parcels to Russia from Teheran. The owner of the firm was a Persian Jew who had a permit from the Russian delegation to post such parcels. It was a standard parcel containing among others soup, tea, soap, a pair of shoes (which had no value in Russia), rice and some other minor items. The most important and the best value was the tea. The Russians were fond of it and my family would be able to exchange it for a lot of provisions. The other items were of very little use. The charge for one parcel in Persian currency corresponded to five English pounds. I found out that on producing a receipt from the above firm to the Jewish Agency they would send an extra parcel to any member of my family free of charge, and this arrangement worked well.

On 25th December the Teheran Daily News (edition of 20th December) published various pictures from the well known conference in Teheran with Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin. One photograph was of Winston Churchill wearing the caracul hat presented to him on his 69th birthday on 30th November by the press delegation in the British Embassy, and for which Churchill had posed specially for the cameramen. Another showed the steps of the Soviet Embassy with Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin seated and behind them Churchill's daughter Sarah, who acted as hostess for him during the conference, and also Anthony Eden, Averill Harriman and Molotow. Churchill at that time was the man I most admired in the Western world, and any press cuttings about him I collected enthusiastically.

I was seeing Martin Shenberg almost daily and had become very attached to him. We had known each other for some time, neither of us having news about our wives, both of whom were called Zosia, and we shared our mutual problems. Martin was attached to the Polish General Hospital in Teheran where he had been since he left Russia, and where he was held in high regard. We were constantly startled on our walks about Teheran by the traffic, which seemed almost suicidally out of control. The Persian traffic officers, comatose in the sun, ignored it until offered baksheesh for some favour, whereupon they sprang into action like animated puppets.

Life in the camp was boring. I was invited for New Year's Eve to a party given by a very pretty lady called Irene whom I had met in Guzary and whose husband was an officer in the Polish Forces. When he was moved to a different unit he had requested me to take her under my care.

We had a few drinks together and kissed each other warmly, a natural reaction to celebrate the coming of the New Year, but I must confess my circulation was accelerated, and so was hers'! I left the party soon afterwards and she asked me to come again as often as I could as she valued my friendship highly.

The next group of doctors relieved from active service left Teheran at the beginning of January 1944. I called them the Indian group as some of them were actually sent to India. From the original number of doctors drafted to the civilian population of refugees, I was the only one left in the camp. I felt quite overlooked and could only wait and see what was going to happen to me. Meanwhile I spent my free time studying the Persian religion.

About 75% of the population were Shiites and 20% were Sunnites, the traditional believers. In the majority of the Moslem countries the predominant sect is Sunnite but in Persia the Shiite sect prevails. As the Moslem world did not recognize the Shiite sect, this could account for Persia's long-standing isolation from the rest of the Islamic world. The Christian population, together with a sprinkling of Jews and followers of the Zoroastrian cult, accounted for the remaining 5%. Although all world religions are said to have a common root, it was difficult for me to equate these Oriental beliefs with my own.

At last I received an order to leave for Isfahan, so I said goodbye to Irene and Martin on 8th January 1944 and left Teheran for my new assignment. As there were no trains I had to travel by bus on a very monotonous journey through the desert. I arrived in the afternoon at Qum, the holy city of the Shiites with its famous mosque, a shrine for pilgrims. Also here was the tomb of Fatima, the sister of Imam Reza, where I stopped for a meal and spent the night in the local inn. After dinner, lured by the magnificent dome of the mosque, golden in the setting sun, I went in. It was crowded with Moslems assembling for evening prayers. I stayed a while taking in the peculiarly oriental feel of the place, before returning to the inn. Unfortunately there was constant noise throughout the night which made sleep impossible, and I was glad when morning came so that I could continue on my way to Isfahan.

The next day I reported to the S.M.O., to be briefed on my duties. Later I was lucky to meet a local Persian called Ruhollach Sassoon with his Polish girlfriend who helped me to find a flat in the centre of the town. The landlord was a Persian Jew, by the name of Fajsula Hakimpur, which in Persian means "the son of a doctor". The flat was on the first floor and consisted of a bedroom with two beds, one meant for me and the other

for examining patients, and a sitting room, both rooms being furnished.

I was assigned as a school doctor to several institutions. A Persian cabman, from whom I later learnt a smattering of the language, took me to the first establishment which was about 3 km. away from the flat. It was situated in woodlands and my initial impression was that it looked rather neglected. There was a surgery and an isolation ward for feverish children. The only pleasant things here were the nurse, Janina, and the surgery itself. The administrator of this establishment was a respectable gentleman, but rather nervous and I was not sure whether he was a suitable person to deal with children. Afterwards I called at the second institution, marked number 1A, and there I was introduced to the nurse, Helena, who seemed reliable and competent. With her I inspected the whole establishment, and found there to be about 400 pupils aged 8 and above. As I was new, I decided to be rather cautious in my dealings and not to form any hasty opinion although I found some hygienic shortcomings. The nurse explained to me that feverish children were kept for short periods in the isolation room and if any complications were diagnosed they could be transferred to the local hospital where there were better facilities. The Persian cabman arrived at midday and took me to establishment number 7 which was located in a nice building on the first floor. Here nurse Erna was in charge of 100 boys.

In the evening I paid a visit to my landlord, a man of about 30, and his younger wife and daughter, aged two. I tried my best to speak English with my scanty knowledge of it, and must have succeeded well enough, as I was invited the following day to join them in their evening meal.

The next morning the landlord's wife requested me to examine her. She had undergone a hysterectomy in the past for fibroids and was most anxious to have another child. I had to explain several times that further child-bearing was impossible as she no longer had a uterus. Although she was so young, her face was prematurely wrinkled and aged.

On my first Sunday the young Persian, Sassoon, visited me and suggested I should have a look at the local bazaar with him. As in Teheran, life was simmering in the bazaar and I thought that, with its oriental flavour, it might mirror some aspects of Persian life. We stopped at the jewellery stall, where I was very taken with the ornamental gold work, especially the bracelets which were exquisitely finished. The elegant silver jewellery, the exhibition of majolica jugs and the enamelled pottery all delighted the senses. It needed a conscious effort to turn away and continue to the next place of interest, which was the carpet workshop, where we watched and admired the very young Persian girls

as they worked with their skilled fingers. What masterpieces of carpetry were created! The large hand-knitted carpets with florid and rich patterns could sometimes take a year to produce. I was lulled by the strains of oriental music and the exotic atmosphere which was suddenly broken by cries of "Monsieur, Monsieur". I turned to see the outstretched hands of a child, a woman and a young man begging for alms, which broke the spell and brought me sharply to the realisation that most of the population here lived below the poverty line.

I soon made a number of new acquaintances, as my Persian landlord spread the news that a European doctor had recently arrived in Isfahan and was living in his house. Within a few days I had some private patients and began attending English lessons. Our teacher was a Persian clerk employed by a British firm. The lessons were designed for the local Polish refugees, and as it happened, one of the pupils was a very elegant Polish lady, Mrs. Zawadzka, aged about 50 or 60, who was surprised that such a young doctor as myself had been drafted to look after the civilian refugees and not kept in the Forces. I did not want to be involved in a long discussion about it so I just said, "One day I shall explain to you why I am here". She was very depressed as she had had no news from her husband who was supposed to be somewhere in Russia, and her daughter and son-in-law who had been in Warsaw at the outbreak of war. Watching her I found a resemblance in her expression and looks to a young man, Michael Zawadzki whom I kept in my ward in Krasnyj Paxar for months. While talking, she told me that she would like to meet a doctor from Cracow who had saved her son's life. When I mentioned the Christian name of her son and gave other details, she started crying from joy at such an unexpected meeting. When she regained her composure she gave me further news about Michael, that he was at present in London on active service. After that she invited me every Sunday for lunch and we spent our time chatting together like old friends.

The course of the War and my fate had brought me to Persia, a country which I recalled from my history lessons at college, but I felt sorry that destiny had brought me here as a refugee and wanderer as I would have much preferred to visit it as a tourist. Most probably, under those circumstances, the land of pomegranates and almonds would have appeared to me far more attractive. The Persians showed every hospitality to the Poles and a sort of friendship was built up between the two peoples but the lack of knowledge of the language was a barrier to making closer contact. Like my fellow countrymen, I tried to pick up the essential words so much needed in the daily routine. As I had some local patients I had to learn certain medical words because I could not expect

to rely on my landlord all the time, although with some Persians I could manage with English.

The town of Isfahan had about 200,000 inhabitants, among them about 12,000 Jews. It was the centre of artistic industry and its silver and copper goods were very well known worldwide. Chahar Bagh, The Avenue of Four Gardens, was the main street of the town and a display of oriental splendour.

One of the features I found very striking was the Persian habit of watering the streets with cans which, instead of sprinklers, had holes in the bottom. Other habits were less attractive, and it was disturbing to see very young children in the streets aged from about 4 to 8, dressed in tatters, begging for money, while in the same street, luxurious cars rolled past, driven by well-dressed men accompanied by women flaunting exquisite jewellery around their necks and wrists. These stark contrasts seemed heightened by the incessant loud rhythmic music to be heard day and night coming from the workshops in the streets, where young Persian boys worked long hours with their small chisels and hammers producing beautiful ornamental articles from silver – decorative boxes, frames for mirrors and photos, phials, sugar basins, chandeliers, ashtrays, vases etc. The boys looked pale and tired when I called at the workshops in the evenings sometimes to see what the conditions of hygiene were like, but they invariably greeted me in a friendly way. They probably realised that I was on their side, which the occasional smile on their weary faces acknowledged.

Work in the school institutions appealed to me very much. I not only devoted my time to the treatment of various ailments but also the boys' appearance and general behaviour. I introduced as a routine procedure periodic inspections, similar in some ways to those I had learned at the Cadet school, and I carried them out in the presence of the lady teachers. I tried to improve the standard of hygiene by checking the cleanliness of ears, hair, finger nails and teeth, and every child had to produce at such an inspection his toothbrush and toothpaste or tooth powder. I also educated them and taught them how to behave when they attended the surgery and to pay respect to the nurse, the teacher and the doctor by saying good morning or bowing.

The journey with the cabman was one of my daily pleasures in Isfahan. On the way to the school I passed Mullahs with beards dyed with henna and noticed that the tails and foreheads of the horses and donkeys were dyed too. Plants producing dyes such as henna and saffron were cultivated widely in Iran. My knowledge of local customs

was enhanced when I made the acquaintance of the son of the Persian prince who was the owner of the school (Institution No. 1). The young prince was about 20, good looking and married to a very pretty, young and intelligent English girl. Also among my friends were a number of Indian officers and soldiers, and on one occasion, while talking about various customs, an Indian companion told me, "You see, your European women apply lipsticks, and mascara for dyeing the eyelashes. Our women do it in a more aesthetic and hygienic way by applying only a touch to the forehead".

It was now February 1944, and I was beginning to get better known in Isfahan. One evening I was invited to a local Persian doctor's home, where I met another doctor who had graduated in Switzerland and was also in practice in Isfahan. The social evening went smoothly as we conversed more in English than in German. The room occupied by the host doctor were luxurious and furnished in good taste, the Persian carpets naturally contributing a great deal to the brightness of the rooms. We were entertained before dinner in the lounge (the host called it the club room) where the table was laid out almost professionally with drinks, wine, snacks and fruit. There were three ladies present, the hostess – the doctor's wife, my landlord's wife and their niece, and we found we could understand each other well. It was warm inside from the large paraffin heater, which in Persia was every economical to run as petrol and its products were so cheap.

The first dish served in the separate dining-room was a kind of minestrone soup, which was well prepared, followed by rice with mutton cutlets, and also a Persian speciality called Fessendjom, which consisted of minced turkey cooked with tomatoes and ground walnuts. This really was delicious. For dessert we had various fruits, after which it was time to express thanks to the host and hostess. On parting they assured me that it would give them a great deal of pleasure if I would come again.

During February there was plenty of work in the schools. I carried out an inspection of the boys and tried to select those who in my opinion looked under-nourished, and who would benefit from a high calorie diet, as a special fund had been allocated by a Catholic American committee for that purpose. The fund was placed at the disposal of the Polish Delegation and intended for the school children, which I thought was a most humanitarian and well meant gesture. It was the doctor's duty to see that the intention was properly carried out, and I was happy to see it implemented.

I tried not to get involved in any amorous affairs, although there were

temptations and invitations from the opposite sex. I did not want to attract gossip. In such a small community I felt it important to maintain my reputation. I met Mrs. Zawadzka almost daily and became very attached to her almost like to my own mother. My Polish friends teased me, asking why I did not look for a young lady.

One evening I was called to see a Persian Jewess. I went through the narrow streets of the ghetto with the Persian who had summoned me. On arrival I was taken into a room occupied by a crowd of Persian women, and on counting I found about forty there. The patient, who was not more than about 35 years of age, was lying on the floor on a carpet. She looked much older, with her suffering clearly evident on her pale face. There was an interpreter present, who was able to translate my questions and her answers. Examination indicated symptoms of an intestinal obstruction probably due to a growth. After my examination, the family admitted that the patient had been in an English hospital, but an operation had not been carried out and she had been discharged. Her husband was crying and begged me for help. I advised him through the interpreter that his wife was very ill and that her condition required admission to hospital and if the doctor suggested surgery they should agree to it. Unfortunately I have no knowledge of what happened to this poor woman.

Like the Arabs, the Persians observed circumcision, which at the time of my stay in Isfahan was carried out by hairdressers in very primitive and unhygienic conditions. First of all the "operator" usually stretched the foreskin with his long fingernails, which were not always clean, and thereafter cut it with a razor and then sucked out the blood from the bleeding wound. The men performing circumcisions were not always in good health, so on some occasions that sort of operation led to syphilis or tuberculosis if they themselves were suffering from such diseases. In a similar way in the lower poor working Jewish classes this operation was carried out by a practising Jew. People who could afford it had circumcisions done by doctors in the hospital. The young Sassoon, as an intelligent educated man, had been circumcised in hospital by a doctor.

I listened attentively when Sassoon told me of the various Persian customs and about life in Persia generally. He described a tribe called Ghashkaj who lived a nomadic life and who were known for their women of strong constitution and good health. It sometimes happened that an expectant woman would go into labour during their wanderings, at which she was left on her own. She prepared a hole in the earth or sand for the actual delivery, and when the child was born she just cut the umbilical

cord. She prepared a special food for herself consisting of butter, honey, nuts and raisins, put her infant in a small folded sheet on her back and continued her migration to rejoin the tribe.

It seemed as though the powers-that-be were determined not to let me settle anywhere for long. I was ordered to return to Teheran at short notice. My stay in Isfahan, once the capital of Persia in the great days of its founder Shah Abbas (1587–1628), had been a happy one, I said goodbye to my friends sadly, and was surprised when Mrs. Kobryn, a friend of the Director of Medical Services, rushed up and gave me a letter while I was seated next to the lorry-driver, awaiting departure. "This letter is open", she said, as I noticed the address on it. "Please read it and then seal it up. I hope we shall soon see you back here."

I read the message quickly. It spoke highly of my work in the schools and requested my early return. I was more than a little pleased, and on arrival at Teheran to report for my new assignment, I lost no time in giving it to the D.M.S. As soon as he had finished reading it, he asked. "Would you like to return to Isfahan?"

Much as I would have liked this, I was determined to show my disapproval of his methods.

"You summoned me urgently, and here I am", I told him. "Why did you call me away when I was doing good work in Isfahan?"

"I have to use my resources in the best way", he said.

"Surely it's better to leave a man where he is doing good work, than bring in a stranger who has to start all over again?"

The D.M.S. made no answer to this. I could see that he was annoyed at my questioning his competence. "You'll be reporting to Major Rogowski at the Polish General Hospital", he told me. "You've worked with him already, so it is not like starting afresh."

I wasted no time in looking up my good friend Martin Shenberg who found a room for me in a house run by an Armenian lady sympathetic to Poles. Then I tried once again to put myself into a frame of mind that would accept this latest move as part of what had to be.

Soon I was aware of rumours concerning my departure from Isfahan. One was that I had been having an affair with a certain Polish lady, quickly disproved when the lady in question applied for a job at the hospital. Another had it that I was too popular there for the senior doctors, who engineered my transfer. It all went to illustrate that merit had little to do with promotion or even getting and keeping a good

assignment. What counted was having the right connections and this was precisely what I lacked.

My duties were routine and unexciting compared with the challenge of Isfahan. When time permitted I visited some of my Polish friends in the camp on the periphery of Teheran. Best of all I paid frequent visits to Irene. Our friendship had not developed beyond the innocent stage, and indeed I received a letter from her husband thanking me for looking after her so well. Her charm did much for my morale at a frustrating period.

Another way of filling in time before the inevitable posting was in taking further English lessons. This was more difficult than I had thought, as the only person I could find was a British soldier. It was clear after only two lessons that he lacked any teaching ability, which was very disappointing as Martin was more advanced than I with more opportunity to learn, and I wanted to catch up.

Martin and I had been through much together since being released from the last Russian camp. As my best friend, he was confidant and comrade, sympathetic to my hopes and fears for the future which were also his own. When notified of my posting to Kenya, I experienced a great sadness. I would not miss the constant manoeuvrings for position that seemed to be the main preoccupation of my superiors in Teheran, but I would certainly find it difficult to fill the void that leaving my friend would create. Our parting in May was an emotional wrench that left me more unsettled than ever.

## LEAVING TEHERAN FOR KENYA

### CHAPTER 8

Once again I left Teheran for Ahwaz, where we put up in a hutted camp. It was very hot, like living in the desert again. except that there were two swimming pools, one for the white soldiers and officers, and the other for the coloured soldiers. This was really a most pleasant surprise, and I was able to swim at least once daily.

I was appointed Medical Officer in charge of the transport of Polish refugees with the assistance of two nurses, from the moment we boarded the train at Ahwaz railway station until our arrival in the Persian harbour of Khorramshahr. I had to wear an arm band with a red cross and the inscription M.O., throughout the journey. We departed from Ahwaz as evening approached after arranging suitable seats and compartments for the elderly and sick. Everything was well organised with the help of the two nurses and all went smoothly. As a matter of interest the D.M.S. had asked me at the station to find a suitable compartment for his lady friend as well, which luckily I was able to arrange to the satisfaction of both of them.

The next morning, 27th May, we arrived at Khorramshahr where I had to make sure that the emergency kit of medical supplies and drugs was transferred to the care of a lady doctor, who had to take over as ship's doctor, assisted by four nurses, during the voyage on the ship "City of London". Very soon after embarkation there was an outbreak of "Morbus Cabinicus", as we called it at that time, a sort of new war slang. A number of passengers and also some doctors, mainly middle aged, alleged that they did not feel well enough in view of the very hot weather to be left on deck, and instead wished to be given places in more comfortable cabins, but the number of cabins available was limited. A doctor's wife acted as interpreter during our journey. She really was *persona grata*, being fluent in both Polish and English, and well deserved the extra priveleges her efforts were rewarded with during the journey. I slept in the open air on the deck, because to sleep at the bottom of the ship was tantamount to inviting a very unpleasant death. The heat there was unbearable as there was no air due to the fans now working properly, and one was drenched in perspiration. In the early hours of the morning of 30th May our ship sailed along the Persian Gulf, passing some small islands which looked uninhabited, and stopped at the Gulf of Oman. The air was practically burning, which for the elderly amongst us was a really traumatic experience. It required an effort to have meals in the enclosed lower deck, but having suffered so much

hardship since 1940, I took the view that it could have been worse. The food was satisfactory considering that it was wartime.

During those few days on the ship I was driven to think that Ahwaz was almost a paradise compared with the conditions and the heat during our journey through the Gulf. I admired the way my asthmatic friend, Henry Weiss, the dentist, displayed real fortitude in enduring the burning heat and poor conditions. A new acquaintance, Jolanta, was an interesting person. She was an attractive brunette, as little over 30, daughter of the elderly Mr. Boski, whose welfare I had been made responsible for during the journey. The third member of the family group was her sister-in-law Roma.

We had to wait for a military convoy, and as soon as it arrived we continued our journey under military escort. It was already 3rd June 1944, and as the Arabian Sea was rather rough, a number of passengers suffered from sea sickness and were given what few remedies for nausea were available. The next stop was in Karachi on 6th June where we waited for some Polish ladies, probably sent by the Polish Delegation in Karachi to greet us. They were smartly dressed and looked very presentable in their tropical helmets.

We continued our journey through the Indian Ocean, which was very quiet and smooth, on 13th June, under the convoy two torpedo boats, and on the 18th we passed the Equator. One learned a lot by the experience, and Jolanta, Henry the dentist, and myself got mattresses on the deck in the open air, where at least some sleep was possible. In the day-time we took it in turns to guard our places so that we did not lose them. We now had a different and more pleasant Malayan crews on board who used to entertain us in their quarters in the evenings with guitar concerts. They wished to learn from me how to propose in Polish to our nurses, and in return for teaching them how to approach the girls I had a shirt washed and ironed every day!

At last the scenery began to change, and on 21st June I could see palm trees and some small houses on the shore as we approached the coast of East Africa. Shortly afterwards we arrived at Mombasa harbour in Kenya where we disembarked. We were welcomed by the new D.M.S. from Nairobi, Dr. Bincer, who recognised me immediately, as in my medical student days he had been one of the principal assistants of Professor Latkowski, Professor of the Medical Department at the University Clinic in Cracow. As soon as he saw me in the crowd he approached and shook hands with me, asking how I was.

After we had settled in the train, I went with Henry to the market in

Mombasa, where I purchased a huge basket of fruit and on return to the train handed it over to Jolanta who distributed it to the passengers in the compartment. On the morning of 22nd June our train arrived at the railway station at the small village of Makindu where there was a camp for Polish refugees near the station. I realised that with the new arrivals it would take some time before things became organised. I was allocated to a room in a wooden hut as the fifth tenant, the other four being close relatives of Major Rogowski.

It was a rather inconvenient arrangement but I accepted that it was only temporary, and I could not really expect such comfort as I had had in Isfahan or Teheran, as this was a Kenyan village. Jolanta's father was allocated to a quite comfortable small hut with his daughter, but in the meantime he had developed a cardiac infarct, requiring me to look after him and devote a lot of time to his care.

So far I had no official order of assignment, and I waited patiently in Makindu. There was already a very young doctor there who acted as the M.O. for the district and lived in the hospital, and a British nurse. There were just a few beds, allocated only to white people; natives who needed treatment being referred to a different hospital. I could see that there was no point in the authorities having me there, as the M.O. could easily manage such a small refugee camp, and I thought while waiting and doing nothing except taking care of Mr. Boski that I would return to teaching. It gave me great pleasure to act as a teacher in the interim period for the local Polish children, which I did with the approval of the quartermaster of the camp. There was nobody else to do the job, and of course the camp committee was delighted.

About a month after our arrival, there was an outbreak of fire which damaged a lot of huts. I was amazed and full of admiration at the way one British soldier without a fire extinguisher took command of dozens of natives and how efficiently they carried out getting the fire under control. To my surprise it had not affected my friend, Henry, in spite of his asthma, and for a moment, as he stood looking at the fire, he reminded me of Nero looking with pleasure on burning Rome. The day after that outbreak, over 200 Polish refugees, among them Dr. Wolfeiler and his wife, left for different camps and a few days later I parted with Henry, who was also transferred. I was sorry for him as he spoke hardly a word of English, but on arrival at his destination he wrote to me saying that one travels easily, even without the knowledge of the local language, as long as one tips well!

I had become almost a regular member of Colonel Marriot's hunting

parties. He was the British District Officer, a retired Lt. Colonel. We travelled in a jeep along a narrow road especially prepared by the natives through the bush. There were usually one or two natives in the party and occasionally some Poles from the camp or the Polish police officer. The natives' presence was important. Their eyesight was superior to ours', and as they were to all intents and purposes born in the bush, all their senses were far better developed, so that they could sense danger much earlier. Sometimes when we stopped in the bush, Colonel Marriot ordered them to climb a tall tree to look around, when they were occasionally able to show us a spot where a rhinoceros was resting under a tree, which from our jeep we could not see.

On such a hunting expedition about 4 to 6 km. from the camp, we almost daily saw herds of deer of different species, zebras, buffalos and giraffes, but only occasionally one or two rhino, an elephant or a lion. I hated the killing of the animals but this was Colonel Marriot's passionate and only pleasure in Makindu where life was so isolated. I took part purely as a nature lover and never in fact made use of my gun. The animal killed, often a deer, was left on the spot or the natives took it away with them. The next day when we approached the spot where the carcass had been left, if the vultures were in the trees it usually meant that the lions were feeding off it. On one occasion when the natives opened a deer's abdomen and I saw an unborn calf inside, I could not eat meat for weeks.

About the end of July a Polish Count arrived in Makindu to fulfil his ambition to kill a lion in the bush or jungle, and asked the Colonel to allow him to join his hunting party. This time we went in a lorry as the Poles were attracted by the presence of a real Polish Count and obtained permission to join us. Some 5 or 6 km. from the camp we came across a lioness with cubs. To my surprise, after running off, she then slowed down and almost stopped, hardly more than a hundred metres or so from our lorry. It lasted seconds, though it seemed much longer, and during those few seconds the Count got permission to shoot the lioness and fired, taking three shots to kill her. The Colonel later asked me whether all Polish Counts were such bad shots as Count Zamojski!

Near to our camp there was quite a large flat field which served as an aerodrome for the operation of small aircraft. I used to go there with the nurses when out walking just to watch the ostriches, giraffes and also various species of birds and deer, which seldom ran away while we were there. When I went there in the morning I was enchanted by the sunrise over the summit of the mountains, Kilimanjaro, 19,321 ft. high covered with snow, beautiful, gigantic and glittering with a cascade of colour.

Excursions and mountaineering were already planned but it was too early for me to think about taking part.

On 15th August there were unconfirmed reports that I would be transferred as a doctor to the Polish orphanage. I was pleased with the prospect of such an assignment, but in spite of the rumours I was now given a nice room with a mosquito net, bed, table and chairs. I put my clothing into an iron case as protection against the white ants and termites found in Makindu which could otherwise completely destroy my belongings. Having a room to myself and being able to read Polish and English books delivered from the local camp library made me feel much better. Jolanta was a regular visitor, bringing breakfast to my room almost daily. Meanwhile her father continued his steady improvement. The nurses from the Teheran transport were also regular visitors and they were pleased when I accepted their invitation to join them for lunch and evening meals. From time to time I still accompanied Colonel Marriot on his hunting expeditions but I always got smothered with ticks from the savannah grass and scattered trees. The insects stuck to my body, and on my return I had to use force to remove them from my skin under a shower.

My daily timetable started with a morning call on Mr. Boski, after which from 10 a.m. to 1 p.m. I taught the Polish children which gave me enormous pleasure. I tried to improve their Polish and instructed them in various subjects such as Polish geography, literature on a limited scale, and history. I also tried to improve their standard of elocution and behaviour and so on, exactly as I had done with the children in Isfahan. In the afternoon, if I did not join the hunting party, Jolanta used to come to my room as she lived next door. We became very friendly and understood each other well. She knew that I was married and that I loved my wife, but it did not affect our friendship. She was a very pleasant and intelligent companion to talk to, and without her I wouldn't really have had anyone to converse with on my own level. With Jolanta's father, who in Poland had been respected as an intellectual, a whole range of subjects could always be discussed as he was both alert and well versed in politics, leaning towards socialism. Sometimes he became rather suspicious about my relationship with his daughter, as indeed any father would have been, but never raised an objection.

The atmosphere in the camp was full of excitement when on 25th August the broadcaster announced that Paris had been liberated by the Allied Forces and that Parisians were mad with joy, dancing in the streets and singing the Marseillaise.

To keep my mind occupied I read a lot and continued to study English.

I realised how helpless I was. While I could assist my family in Russia with regular parcels, I could not help my wife, nor my brother or sister left in Poland. The waiting for news seemed interminable. Sometimes I had horrific nightmares in which I saw them being tortured and killed, and I would wake in a cold sweat of fear, trembling in every limb.

Contradictory information was now reaching me from the commandant of the Polish camp that I should be posted to Morogoro in Tanganyika where there was a Polish camp needing a doctor. Three days later another message came saying that there was the possibility of transferring me back to the Forces if any military transport was available. I was also informed that the Polish Delegation had requested the Army H.Q. to extend my stay in East Africa as a doctor for the Polish refugees for some time. I paid little attention to all this.

Upon receiving permission from the local office, I employed a young native boy who kept my room clean, washed and ironed my tropical outfit, linen etc. and also did shopping for me in the small village market. Every day for breakfast I had a variety of pawpaw which the locals called papaya. The papaya grew on low palm-like trees of which there were plenty around the camp. The most impressive tree in Africa was the baobab. It was huge, with an immensely thick trunk that was often as much as 8 metres in circumference.

The boy, Muze, was very attached to me and I much appreciated his services. If something was left after meals, he always asked me whether he could take it home for his mother and father and some eight children. I sometimes took a walk to the village, just to see how the natives lived. On one occasion I noticed a mother nicking the skin of her daughter's back and drawing blood. I knew about two or three hundred Swahili words, and I asked the mother why she was mutilating her daughter's skin, which would result in scars. She explained that this was an accepted custom in the tribe to make the bride attractive for her wedding night. I also noticed the different ornamental pieces, small funnels, circles in the lobules of the ears, or small stars or earrings attached to the nostril, with some nostrils slightly perforated, and chains and bracelets around the ankles. The majority of the females had their chest and upper abdomen uncovered, and these parts looked very flabby. The village I visited was primitive, the huts conically shaped and covered with straw. Inside, there were no windows, and on the ground one could see mats used for bedding. Clay pottery was scattered around, along with hunting weapons such as bows, arrows and spears. The natives cultivated maize, and from the tubers of the cassava plant and also from millet as well as maize they prepared flour using very simple handmills or wooden

pounders. One of the locals explained to me the meaning of the bracelets worn by the Kenyan girls on their wrists. The actual meaning depended upon the width of the bracelet. One narrow one indicated that the girl was not mature; two wide ones that she was mature but unmarried; one wide one that she was married.

Hunting interests became almost an addiction with me. The Colonel liked company and I found both scenery and wildlife so excitingly beautiful as to be constantly absorbing. At times one could see different species of deer, among them the oryx, a large straight-horned African antelope. In order to hunt, one had to get a licence from the Game Department in Nairobi, but the actual amount asked was reasonable. It was forbidden to hunt rhino, as their numbers were dminishing, but extensive poaching by the natives was unfortunately common. The Colonel explained to me that a permit holder could kill one elephant per annum, but if by accident or in self-defence a second was killed in a year, then the hunter was obliged to report it to the Game Department and usually had to pay the equivalent of the value of the tusks of the animal. The elephant's carcass was left to the natives who used the meat for a barbecue while the clean tusks were given to the hunter.

On some days we saw one or two rhinos, but often when important visitors came from Nairobi to see one in the bush and stayed two or three days, none were spotted and they had to return disappointed. But as soon as they had left, on the very next hunting expedition we always seemed to encounter one. I won't easily forget the afternoon in November 1944 when I was out once more with the hunting party. Ahead of us before entering the bush was a field, where Colonel Marriot ordered the driver to stop. Perhaps 130 to 150 metres in front of us could be seen a mother deer and her baby. Colonel Marriot said to me, "I will show you how to kill a deer instantly. If you aim precisely and deliver the blow at the jugular vein, I can assure you that this will be the most humane way to kill a deer." To prove it, he took careful aim and fired, penetrating the jugular vein with great accuracy. The mother deer tottered for a few seconds and fell over, while the young one milled around in helpless despair. It hesitated, trying to make up its mind what to do, ran away, and then immediately returned to look at its mother. This went on for some minutes, but as soon as the native boys approached the dead mother, the young one ran away in real distress. This was a very disturbing episode for me, but Colonel Marriot was surprised at my reaction. "Doctor, you really should keep your sentimentality under control", he rebuked me.

Again I was the subject of conflicting orders. First of all I was advised

to make myself ready to go to Tanganyika, which arrangement was cancelled after three days, to be followed shortly by a message from the camp commandant that I would be recalled to active service. Then a telegram was delivered to me a few days later by the deputy of the Polish Delegation from Nairobi, offering me a job in the United Kingdom as a doctor attached to a Polish hospital in Scotland and requesting my acceptance. I seized the opportunity with real enthusiasm but it never materialised. I did not know where I stood and learned to pay scant attention to such orders. I thought at that stage that the only solution would be to find a military transport in order to rejoin the Forces.

On 2nd October 1944 we heard the wonderful news that Warsaw had been liberated, to the immense delight of the refugees. It immediately occurred to me that most probably the Russians were now in Warsaw and I asked myself whether they would move out when we returned to Poland?

On 8th January 1945 I was asked to report to Nairobi to the office of the Polish Delegation. There I found that the suggestion made some time ago about my assignment to the United Kingdom was no longer possible and that it had not yet been decided whether I should remain in East Africa or be transferred to the Forces. This was most disappointing, but at least I was in Nairobi for the first time, which I found most impressive after boring Makindu. I liked Nairobi station decorated with an ivory tusk over the entrance, and although I had already booked my day and hour of return to Makindu I was surprised to find my name and the number of my seat and compartment written on the blackboard on the platform. At that time it was not permitted to travel in the same compartment as the natives.

Before leaving the camp I had a most unpleasant encounter with a retired Polish officer from the Delegation in Nairobi who arrived in the camp to interview some refugees. To say that the interrogation was hostile would be a euphemism. Without going into the details, I can say that his manner was so offensive that in the end I had to tell him I was not one of his domestic servants, and demanded to be transferred to my unit.

The Quartermaster Mr. Moszczynski called at my room after the event and said to me, "you acted in a most dignified way, and this was also the opinion of all your friends".

The officer from the Delegation instructed the Quartermaster to suspend my medical salary as from 1st February, 1945, and I was only to

be paid £1.00 monthly to cover all my expenses until leaving for my unit.

Mr. Moszczynski offered to pay me for teaching the Polish children for the past few months and requested me to continue, which was highly appreciated by their parents. He was aware that I was in need of money for sending parcels to my family to Russia through Nairobi. In the meantime the undercurrents of antagonism towards me began to surface. Odd comments here and there indicated that in spite of the good work I was doing and meticulous attention to my duties, I faced one insurmountable obstacle. I was a Jew among non-Jews. At one stage I was so unhappy that my diary recorded "the atmosphere today has been so bad it is almost like a gangrene".

The camp commandant tried hard to get rid of me, but he was helpless as it was not in his power to arrange a military transport for me. Then at last, deliverance came *Dei gratia*, and on 8th April 1945 I parted from my few very dedicated friends and the native boy, who cried at the railway station and said he would never again have such a boss, a good white doctor, like me.

## RECALL TO THE FORCES AND ARRIVAL IN UNITED KINGDOM

## CHAPTER 9

The next day I embarked in Mombasa on the ship, *Talma*. The following day the Commandant of the ship, Major Solomon, approached me and introduced himself, saying that he had found out that I was a doctor of medicine. He asked me whether this was true, and when I confirmed it he was surprised that on the embarkation list I was shown as "J. Geller", without any title. I was embarrassed, and since I did not want to blame the Polish authorities, I said it must have been overlooked. The Major noticed my slight hesitation in answering him and said, "You are4 Jewish, aren't you. When I affirmed it he said, "So now I can tell you that you haven't been overlooked by the Polish authorities. It was done on purpose, and from my own experience I can also tell you, if you don't know, what kind of antisemitism exists in Polish camps".

Then he advised me to write a few lines to the Captain of the ship giving a few details about my being a doctor, and he would deliver it for me.

The next morning I was allocated to a cabin, which I shared with a convalescent English soldier and with whom I became friendly. The Captain assigned me as a doctor to be in charge of Deck No. 1, and it was while I was settling in that the sad news reached us on 13th April of the death of President Roosevelt.

I found out that there was a Jewish Brigade from Mauritius on the ship, attached to the British Forces, consisting of Polish, Czech, Austrian and German Jews, and as it was Saturday evening they sang Hebrew songs. Major Solomon participated in this social gathering and I joined in as well.

The Indian Ocean was calm as we passed the island of Sokotra and sailed through the Gulf of Aden. On the news we heard that the Allied Forces were 45 miles from Berlin and that fighting was going on in Halle and Leipzig. It was heartening to realise that at last the Nazis were being pushed back, and discussing the latest news gave me confidence in my ability to converse in English, aided by my convalescent companion in the cabin.

The shoals of dolphins and flocks of seagulls were quite an attraction when on 17th April we arrived in Aden, and a number of British soldiers embarked. I was busy in the surgery during our short stay examining my

fellow Poles and also soldiers from the Jewish Brigade. We sailed from Aden in the late afternoon accompanied by large flocks of seagulls, and on 18th April we left the Straits of Mandeb behind, sailing through the Red Sea, passing the harbour of Assab along Eritrea on the left, and sometime later the Archipelago Dahlak, a group of small islands.

I enjoyed the comfort of my cabin and the flattering remarks about my progress in English conversation made by my companion. On 23rd April we reached the Port of Suez in Egypt. I arrived in the army transit camp and had to wait for my assignment yet again.

I went to Cairo on 17th May and stayed in a guesthouse where Poles were welcomed, and the next morning joined an excursion arranged by the Y.M.C.A. to see the pyramids, the sight of which was really incredible. I wondered how they could have been built in ancient times without modern equipment, how many people must have worked on such a construction, and how many accidents must have occurred during the building of the complicated stone work.

The guide informed us that 10,000–20,000 people died annually, so that almost half a million Egyptians perished during the years of construction. Who is able to convey how much blood, tears, pain and oppression were involved in the erection of such monuments?

At the beginning of June 1945 I was assigned to the Polish General Hospital No. 8 (previously No. 1) in the T.B. Section. I could not say that the work was over-exciting. Streptomycin was not then available, and treatment was limited to that on the lines of my young medical days in Cracow. There was a lot of pulmonary T.B. among the soldiers, some acquired it in the prisons or camps during the time of hardship and privation. Here among the new nurses I met one whom I had met during my short stay in Isfahan, nurse Janina, and I was pleased that she was attached to my section as I knew from experience how efficient she was.

On 24th August I again developed an attack of renal colic with macroscopical haematuria (visible blood in the urine). I was referred to the most outstanding and experienced specialist, Lt. Col. Victor Dix, surgeon to the 27th British General Hospital at Tel-el-Kebir, who carried out most thorough renal X-ray tests including cystoscopy, but no stone was found. Knowing from my medical history that I was a passionate swimmer, he encouraged me to continue my hobby in the Suez Canal. I used to go for a swim with some of my colleagues almost every afternoon since the hospital was situated near the Canal.

An English teacher was assigned to our medical corps, and we now

had regular lessons which I attended with interest and enthusiasm. On some days our teacher talked about the English weather, English customs and also about political life. On more than one occasion he mentioned Hyde Park Corner, where on Sundays one could listen to the many speakers who raised political questions and where one could criticize the Prime Minister and all the different members of the Government with impunity. I just could not accept or believe that this was possible, as speeches like that, or expressions of discontent about the Government in public, were impossible or unheard of in my native country. I thought at that time that upon my arrival in the U.K. I must one Sunday go to Hyde Park Corner and make sure that what our teacher said was true. Our commanding officer asked us to teach essential English to our soldiers, which was a rather hard task as not all of them knew even their own native grammar.

During April 1946, my family returned to Poland, and I received the news that I had been dreading. My wife Zosia had worked during the Nazi occupation for an Aryan Polish dentist in practice at Ojcow, near Cracow. To give her a better chance of survival, he offered to marry her, but she did not accept. She was deported to a camp in Belzec, Poland, where she died. My sister Clara, who had married in 1937, spent some time in Auschwitz before being transported to another camp in Stutthof. In one savage incident, some of the prisoners were forced into the sea by dogs and drowned. Clara was among them. Her husband, imprisoned elsewhere, died also. Brother William, freed by the Russians, returned to Gorlice, where he fell into Nazi hands and was deported to Myeletz (Mielec) Poland. There, while planning to escape with papers declaring him to be a Roman Catholic, he was betrayed. Along with his friends, two brothers called Blech, and my father's brother Oskar, he was taken out to be shot by the Gestapo and buried there in a common grave.

This news was quite shattering to me. The hope of being reunited with these loved ones after the war had sustained me through long days of discomfort and humiliation. It had chased away the frequent nightmares, lightened the dark dawns and given me hope when things were at their worst. Now that I was within sight of freedom, fate had taken away the inspiration and left me with nothing.

I spent weeks agonising over what to do. The diary I had maintained for so long and dedicated to my wife showed pages as empty as the days I was living through. I could not face the thought of returning to Poland, in spite of entreaties from my remaining family. There could be no going back to the days before the War. What alternatives did I have?

Weeks became months, and gradually resumed the habit of making

regular entries in my diary, feeling that at some time in the future I might be glad to have done so. My application to emigrate to the USA was duly recorded, as was my eventual decision to settle in the United Kingdom, which was influenced by my high regard for Winston Churchill, that champion of freedom. The diary records that I left Port Said on the hospital ship *El Nil* on the 13th of November, 1947, and arrived at Southampton on the 24th, a cold, damp day.

As I left the ship, it was with a sense of anti-climax. I had looked forward so much to arriving in Britain, and now, on the windswept dock with the giant derricks dominating the quayside, I faced the reality. I was alone in a strange country, safe from the enemy but facing a different challenge. Somehow I had to rebuild my life, and I had no idea where to begin.

## POSTSCRIPT

My father has suggested that I write a few words to bring his story up to date. On arrival in the U.K. he was transferred to Baron Cross Hospital near Leominster in Herefordshire where he met Dr. E. Holzer, a colleague from the Medical School in Carcow. My father attended English classes regularly and passed two advanced English examinations.

On 18th June 1948 he was discharged from the Polish Resettlement Corps and started working as an assistant to the late Dr. A. Fry who had a general practice in Selhurst, London, S.E. 25, and to whom he had been recommended by friends. He lived in lodgings nearby.

During this period my father received letters from his parents and sister, who at that time lived in Cracow after returning to Poland from Russia. They suggested that he meets Miss Blanka Engelberg who was born in Tarnow and had survived the concentration camps.

Blanka and her sister Klara were teenagers at the time of the German occupation. Of her closest relatives. Blanka's father and one of her brothers, who were in hiding, were betrayed and shot by the SS. In 1940 her other brother was forced by the Gestapo to sign a false statement, was imprisoned in Tarnow, later sent to Auschwitz and never returned.

In 1942 the Gestapo split the 20,000 Jewish inhabitants of Tarnow, half were sent in trucks straight to the extermination camps of Belsen and Treblinka, and the remaining, Blanka, her mother and sister included, isolated in a ghetto, which was liquidated in July 1943. Older people were then sent to the gas chambers but her mother, her sister and herself were put to work in a labour camp Plaszow. Here the healthier ones were picked for work, but the sicker ones, her mother among them, were taken away in trucks and perished. Blanka and her sister Klara were moved to Auschwitz in August 1944, where through strength of character and some luck in escaping the gas chambers, they survived.

In October 1944 they were moved from Auschwitz to Stutthof, near Gdansk, where they contracted typhus. On 25th April 1945 when the Russians started bombarding Gdansk, the Germans liquidated the camp. Those who were not fit to walk were sent to the gas chambers. Blanka and Klara were transported by cargo ship to Kiel. They had been concentration camp inmates for a total of 34 months. Following liberation Klara later settled in Israel.

After the war Blanka returned to Poland, hoping to be able to give her father and brother a proper burial, and then went on to Cracow where she met my father's family.

Blanka arrived in the U.K. on 17th October, 1948, she had been invited by Mr. and Mrs. Jarvis Lecker, my father's cousins, who showed her a lot of warmth and kindness.

During the month which followed Blanka and my father grew closer and through their mutual understanding, friendship, and combined strength, planned to build a new life together. On 28th November, 1948, they were married at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Lecker by the chaplain of the Polish Forces, the late Dr. Steinberg.

They rented a small flat in East Croydon, not far from Dr. Fry's practice.

My father later left Dr. Fry's practice on friendly terms in order to start a new job with better prospects, with Doctors J. Horwich and S. Elton at their practice in Thornton Heath, Croydon, who treated him more as a real partner.

The generous help of his friends Joseph and Margaret Ziegler, from Gorlice, who lived in Paris, and David and Esther Green, enabled him to purchase a small house in Addiscombe, Croydon and start his own practice on the premises.

My father's relationship with his local colleagues was excellent, and he became particularly friendly with Dr. Morris Fishman, Dr. John Lane, Dr. Robin Moffat, Dr. John Roche, and Drs. Margaret and Tom White whose genuine kindness my parents still cherish.

In addition, my parents made friends with the Glazer family and their wives – Ben and Dora. Jack and Netta, Percy and Lyn, Mr. and Mrs. Leo Newman, Doris and Stephen Lipson, Ann and Fred Ashford, Leslie and Margaret Ireson, and Leonard and Doris Newton, who were exceedingly kind. My father's cousin, the late Mania Weber and her husband Max, who ran a small hotel in Brighton. helped my parents in those difficult times by supplying furniture for the surgery, as well as provisions which were rationed at that time.

My father's sister and parents emigrated to Nahariya, Israel, and my mother and father visited them there for the first time in 1951.

My mother helped my father with the medical practice, giving him constant help and devoting her whole life to supporting him in his career. Their friendship turned into true love and my parents planned to have a family and looked forward to their future. With my brother William's birth on 5th February, 1950, and mine on 17th July, 1953 (Mr. Arthur Clift a great friend of my parents was in attendance), my parents' dreams and hopes for a new life full of happiness and sunshine were fulfilled.

My parents still reside in Croydon. My father has recently retired from general practice, but continues to attend medical functions and maintains lively contact with many friends and colleagues across the world.

Cynthia Clare Hollinsworth (nee Geller)

VERITAS